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# Uncovering Examples of Humanizing Praxis and Pathological Violence in Special Education: District, Parent, and Researcher Perspectives

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# UNCOVERING EXAMPLES OF HUMANIZING PRAXIS AND PATHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION: DISTRICT, PARENT, AND RESEARCHER PERSPECTIVES

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**Abstract**

Students of color continue to be labeled with dis/abilities and funneled into segregated settings by special education staff (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). The purpose of this study is to highlight the kinds of experiences students and their family's experience in special education related to humanization and violence. In addition to gaining a better understanding of how special education district staff are working to both reproduce and disrupt the violent exclusion of students of color, this dissertation aimed to center the experiences of parents and students who are being impacted by the exclusionary policies and practices. Using Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) as a theoretical framework reminds educators that the term disproportionality is a euphemism for the state-sanctioned racist and ableist systemic violence students and parents experience (Artiles et al., 2010). Data was collected through narrative interviews with parents, teachers, and district staff as well as through personal reflections. Participants shared examples of violence dis/abled students experience in schools, ways parents are disregarded, and how school districts continue to disinvest in students and families of color. This study terms their experiences as examples of the kinds of "pathological violence" that are enacted within special education. What also surfaced were examples of critical educators implementing humanizing praxis, which is not often discussed or found in the field of special education.

## Signature Page

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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**Dedication**

*This dissertation is dedicated to my parents*

*姚莉耶 and 莊伯勝*

*who like so many immigrant parents*

*moved to a new country*

*so their children could have more opportunities.*

*Thank you for everything.*

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## List of Tables

## List of Figures

## Table of Contents

# Chapter I: Introduction

## Personal Story

In 2016, I was the special education teacher and case manager for a 16-year old student named Amir[1]. In addition to juggling depression and attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), Amir was involved with a local gang and dealing with the recent passing of his mother. Amir was constantly fighting with other students at school and was suspended after a particularly large fight involving 20+ students. The school staff met to discuss next steps and supports for Amir. Since he only recently qualified for special education services, I believed there were additional behavioral supports, interventions, and assessments the school had the capacity to consider and offer. My principal, who had a history of upholding zero-tolerance policies, advocated for Amir to be moved to a different high school, one that had a segregated classroom for students labeled with Emotional Disturbance (ED). The principal cited his needs were severe enough and as the experienced administrator, her opinion was the correct one. The change of school placement was framed to Amir's family as necessary, even though he was just being pushed out of our school in my opinion. The discussion was short and excluded Amir's struggles inside and outside of school and the role the school had in exacerbating his behaviors. We also did not consider his identity as a middle eastern student labeled with a dis/ability[2] and experiences in his life that led up to this point in time. Since I openly disagreed with his change

[1] Amir is a pseudonym used to protect this student's privacy.

[2] Annamma (2017) uses the term dis/ability with the slash to "address the ways dis/ability is not a thing to find and fix, but a process. To be dis/abled is about the ways the environment is constructed and maintained in ways that support or hinder access. It is not that there are no differences between people, it is that some differences we imagine as so significant we must label, segregate, and remediate them. That process of creating access, or lack of access, and labeling differences is what I want to draw attention to with the slash in dis/ability. The goal here is to not to erase difference, but instead to disrupt the conventional thinking of what it means to be dis/abled, and emphasize how dis/ability and ability are constructed based on desired standards" (pp. 7-8). I will be adopting this philosophy and using the term dis/ability in this paper, however, disability will be maintained when referring to official classification structures.

of placement, my principal removed me as his case manager. I was dismayed that our special education content specialist sided with the principal and offered to move Amir into a segregated classroom at another high school. After that situation, I felt guilt for not having more interventions and supports in place for Amir. I also felt frustrated that our content specialist was so easily persuaded to move Amir and wondered if situations like this were common at other schools.

This experience drove my desire to learn and work at the district-level. Soon after, I was offered a position as a special education content specialist. My new role was to provide guidance, consultation, and support to teachers, administrators, families and school sites. This is my fifth year as a content specialist and in this job, I am still learning how to navigate bureaucratic structures, support teachers during a time of crisis for their students and participate in uncomfortable and contentious meetings. As a centrally assigned teacher, I work with multiple schools throughout the district. My first year as a content specialist, I was assigned to support 20 elementary and middle schools which allowed me to see a range of special education programs. Some schools were more inclusive and supportive of students of color than others. A common thread among all the schools were that students were strongly cared for and taught by dedicated teachers. Where the schools diverged was in how much the school community valued and welcomed their non-white students labeled with dis/abilities. Schools that valued their diverse populations invested in professional development on inclusion for their staff, administrators led by example, and there were often strong school communities that worked closely with families. Schools with traditional structures tended to label and push out their students with more complex needs.

One of my responsibilities is to lead discussions with teachers and families when they initiate conversations about their students not being in the correct classroom setting. This part of the job I find most challenging, as these conversations about student misbehaviors and lack of academic progress are typically and understandably subjective and emotional. Schools districts offer a range of special education classrooms and settings, ranging from the general education classroom to hospital/home instruction. District office staff like myself aim to provide clarity for teachers and parents around criteria for placement in different educational settings and ultimately make the formal school placement offers.

I was fortunate to have supervisors and mentors since I became a content specialist who taught me how to navigate change of placement conversations, which come up daily. In addition to using checklists, discussion points, and flowcharts to streamline these discussions, my supervisor and I also required our teachers to use evidence-based behavioral and academic programs and track student progress over a period of time before we considered a change of placement. While many teachers disagreed with our more intensive methods, we believed these strict procedures provided our students enough time to receive interventions and allowed for adults involved to consider all relevant factors, including a student's race, dis/ability, class, culture, and gender. Since students of color are disproportionately represented in special education classrooms, it is important to have these systems in place as to not further perpetuate the problem of disproportionality and reproduce inequalities (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Artiles & Trent, 1994; Bal, Sullivan & Harper, 2014). Blanchet, Klingner, and Harry (2007) say that the American education system is not neutral, so issues relating to a student's race, class, language, and culture need be at the center of educational considerations and decisions.

Unfortunately, not all central office staff requires similarly rigorous standards before offering to move a student. As I have witnessed, a change of placement can be approved without any intervention, review or discussion. My professional experiences with student placement changes and curiosity of how district staff addresses issues of disproportionality drive me to this research. I am also curious of the community and family perspective whose children are the ones being affected by discriminatory school policies. I would like to better understand how disproportionality is perpetuated, reproduced and disrupted by teachers and content specialists. Although the actual power of the central office is minimal, the power lies within being able to ask questions and have a seat at the table when discussions occur. My curiosity and concerns about this issue drove my decisions to focus my dissertation research on the experiences of students and their families in special education related to the disproportionate representation of students of color in more restrictive settings. The next section will introduce the topic for the present study.

**Introduction**

Students of color are overrepresented in special education. For example, African American students represented 15.5% in California enrollment but 20.4% in special education (Fergus, 2010). Despite legislation such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, aiming to equalize access and opportunities for all students, disproportionate representation of students with non-dominant racial and ethnic identity categories continue to be overly referred for special education and placed in segregated classrooms (Harry & Klingner, 2014; Taylor, 2001).

Harry (1994) describes disproportionate representation as the difference between the percentage of a group in special education being larger or smaller than the percentage of that

group within the educational system as a whole. First identified and described in 1968 by Lloyd Dunn, it was argued that biased assessment practices led to the placement of African American students in separate classrooms. Disproportionality occurs predominantly for students from racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse backgrounds, such as the increased classification of African American, American Indian, low-income, and male students (Bal et al., 2014). Research suggests that disproportionality can occur due to many reasons including biased referral and assessment practices historical, contextual, and structural forces in education, ineffective culturally responsive teaching in and attributions to other issues such as poverty, implicit prejudice against poor neighborhoods, built-in racism, and negative bias (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Oshler, & Ortiz, 2010; Bal et al., 2014; Chamberlain, 2006; Cruz & Rodl, 2018).

Overrepresentation in special education is problematic because students of color are often times labeled as dis/abled and then placed into more restrictive settings. Within special education, there is a continuum of placements ranging from least restrictive to most restrictive, with general education as the least restrictive placement and hospital/home instruction as the most restrictive. Examples of more restrictive settings are segregated special education classrooms, entirely segregated schools called non-public school and home instruction. Students who are labeled with a dis/ability risk not accessing other programs, services, and classes that may be more beneficial for them. Although students with dis/abilities have been slowly improving overall in their educational outcomes since 2007 when their participation in statewide testing was mandated, they are still performing about 32 points lower than their non-dis/abled peers (Artiles et al., 2010).

The issue of overrepresentation can lead to placement of students into more restrictive settings. Any placement outside of a general education classroom is considered more restrictive,

under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), because students are away from their non-dis/abled peers for a larger percentage or parts of their days. Artiles and Kozleski (2007) said reasons leading to placements in more restrictive settings can range, but are impacted by structural factors (i.e. funding, teacher quality, staffing), policy and reforms (i.e. discipline policies, statewide testing, assessments), and culture and attitudes of schools (i.e. teacher and administrator values and attitudes, and school and district policy and inclusions). More restrictive placements are problematic because they lead to the development of two separate systems of general education versus special education and stigmatize those with dis/abilities as having to be taught in a different location. In addition, the creation of separate programs and classrooms lead to specializations, different teaching credentials, and allows for general education teachers to believe they are not able to teach students labeled with learning dis/abilities.

District and central office[3] leadership, initiatives, and policies are key in addressing issues of disproportionate representation and defining inclusion for students with dis/abilities. While many recognize that district administrators and central office staff have an important role in school reform, bureaucratic procedures, issues with implementation, inadequate resources, and poor communication between the district and school-sites are among the list of reasons why large districts have trouble around issues of inclusion (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2013). Huberman, Navo, and Parisian (2012) suggest district priorities around instructional support and specific policies that promote inclusion can lead to academic success for all students, that is why it is important for districts to have missions around inclusion.

Within schools and special education, dis/abled students and parents experience violent dehumanization at the hands of educators who inflict social, emotional and physical pain. I describe the kind of violence that our students and families experience in special education as

[3] Throughout the dissertation, I will use district office and central office interchangeably.

pathological. This term draws inspiration from Annamma's (2019) book titled *Pedagogy of Pathologizing: Dis/abed Girls of Color in the School-Prison Nexus.* Speaking specifically about incarcerated young girls labeled with dis/abilities, Annamma (2019) says pedagogies of pathologizations include hyper-surveillance, hyper-labeling, and hyper-punishment create students who did not fit unspoken yet desired normative standards. Although pathology is a term typically used in the medical field, we as educators have adopted science-based strategies in education. We as educators pathologize our students by labeling their behaviors and learning differences. Then we propose treatment plans in the form of IEPs and other interventions. The term pathological is defined as "to a degree that is extreme, excessive, or markedly abnormal and aggression that is violent, hurtful, with intent to harm" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Pathological can refer to a physical or mental disease. It can also be used informally to describe compulsive or obsessive behaviors. Although used in many ways, I believe the term pathological encapsulates the experiences of parents and dis/abled students that arose from the present study included violence, disenfranchisement, punishment, and disregard. The ways our students and families are treated in special education are extreme and have been harmful to the degree that I choose to name our actions as educators as pathological. Within the next section, I will describe the background and summarize previous studies that guide the present study.

**Background**

Though disproportionate representation has been studied for over fifty years, statistics for dis/abled students have not improved (Cortiella, 2007; Kemp, 2006; Wagner & Davis, 2006). For example, studies have found that African American students are 2.99 times more likely to be identified as Intellectually Disabled (ID), 1.17 times more likely to be to be labeled with autism and 1.65 times more likely to be identified with a developmental delay (Blanchette et al., 2009).

Furthermore, African American and American-Indian/Alaskan students have been overrepresented in eligibility categories of Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Emotional Disturbance (ED), and Intellectual Disability (ID) (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Overrepresentation heavily affects Latinx students as well, who are half as likely to be labeled with a developmental delay when compared with same-aged peers and overrepresented in categories of learning disabled and Speech and Language Impairment (SLI) (Blanchett et al., 2009; Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010). Research is limited in reviewing underrepresentation, for example the invisibility of Latinx and Asian American students in many dis/ability categories (Anderson, Howland, & McCoach, 2015; Kincaid & Sullivan, 2017; Yeh, Forness, Ho, McCabe, & Hough, 2004). As a result, Asian American students are less likely to be identified across all eligibilities whereas Latinx students are significantly less represented in the category of Emotional Disturbance (ED) (Talbot, Fleming, Karabatsos & Dobria, 2011). The experiences of students of color in special education vary grateful when compared to their white counterparts.

Below, I will briefly describe the background on two topics related to disproportionality, which are placement in the least restrictive environment and the convergence of racism and ableism.

### *Placement in the Least Restrictive Environment*

Although debated, some scholars believe that placement inside the general education setting for a higher proportion of the day can have positive effects for both dis/abled and non-dis/abled students. Blackorby, Wagner, Cameto, Davies, Levine, Newman, and Sumi (2005) completed a longitudinal study of 11,000 elementary school-aged students and found that students with dis/abilities achieved higher on standardized assessments, were absent less, and performed closer to grade-level if they were placed in the general education setting. Other

scholars have argued that placement in a mainstream, inclusive, or general education setting has social and academic benefits for all students, not just ones with Individual Education Plan (IEPs), though others argue that inclusion can be harmful to both groups (Burnstein, Sears, Wilcoxen, Cabello, & Spagna, 2004; Giangreco, Denis, Cloninger, Edelman, & Schattman, 1993; Kauffman, 2002; Sailor & Rodgers, 2005). The benefits of teaching students in heterogeneous group, such as a fully inclusive setting, include socio-emotional growth, increased academic outcomes, development of stronger relationships, exposure to and acceptance of human differences, increased empathy, caring and understanding, peer modeling, and preparation for the real world for all students (Ko & Boswell, 2013; Murphy, 2018; Yssel, Engelbrecht, Oswald, Eloff, & Swart, 2007).

The ambiguity of special education laws around placement, identification and eligibility are problematic since they largely rely on the subjective judgments of school personnel (Erevelles & Minear, 2010). Students of color are more likely to be labeled as Emotionally Disturbed (ED), Intellectually Disabled (ID), or learning disabled, compared to their white or Asian American peers (Parrish, 2002). Students labeled as severely dis/abled will typically spend the majority of their day in a separate classroom or other segregated institutions (Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016). The concept of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) emerged in the 1960s when leaders in special education advocated for a range of placement options, at a time where institutionalization was common practice (Taylor, 2001). Key legislation such as *Pennsylvania Association of for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1972) stated a preference for student placement in the regular public-school class over separate schools or institutions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). LRE, forward thinking for its time, created a continuum of alternative placements (Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016). Far from requiring students with dis/abilities

to be educated in regular classrooms, LRE largely leaves this determination and decision on educational professionals, instead of families. As a result, many students are denied access to the general education classroom because of the legal interpretations of the law, confusion over the definition of inclusion, and power of IEP team decisions (Taylor, 2001). The problematic nature of this concept has maintained the segregation of students from regular classrooms, the maintenance and creation of special classrooms, and continued separation of dis/abled children from their non-dis/abled peers.

Inclusion as a concept has become ubiquitous in education, although the definition is widely debated (Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016). Definitions of inclusion range of participation in general education for parts of the day to a zero-reject policy in general education classrooms (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Sailor & Roger, 2005). As a philosophy, inclusion is the belief that all students should be valued, although the promotion of inclusion sometimes leads to feel-good community service festivities celebrating diversity whilst maintaining separate classrooms (Villa, Thousand, Nevin, & Liston, 2005). The next section reviews issues of racism and ableism that contribute to the issue of disproportionality.

### *The Convergence of Racism and Ableism*

In America, students are defined and categorized in relation to the white able-bodied center, both racially and ability-wise. Anything deviating from that cultural dominant frame is seen as different and is at risk for being labeled as different and dis/abled. The concept of normalcy in American schools encourages students to fit and blend into a socially approved way of being (Annamma, Connor & Ferri, 2013). These binary ideas of normal and abnormal also create boundaries in which some students fit and others are marginalized based solely on race, language, or perceived ability (Prichard, Annamma, Boelé, & Klingner, 2010). The built-in

racism and ableism of our schooling systems, particularly against our communities of color and those with different abilities, is a bias that continuously gets expressed in the American educational system (Chamberlain, 2006). Racism and ableism work in tandem- oftentimes-invisible ways - validating each other, to construct student identities, self-perceptions, and normalize the ways we act and behave.

Artiles (2011) states that "an interesting paradox arises with the racialization of disabilities [because the] civil rights response for one group of individuals (i.e., learners with disabilities) has become a potential source of inequities for another group (i.e. racial minority students), despite their shared histories of struggle for equity" (p. 431). The paradox that Artiles describes highlights the tensions within special education policies white ultimately benefit white middle-class families who have been instrumental in the advancement of special education policies. As a result, they have benefited most from special education service whereas there is continued inequalities for students of color. The intersection of race, class, power and identity within special education results in drastically different experiences for students. On the one hand, students of color are more likely to experience pathologization, violence, racism, and ableism. On the other hand, white students in special education may receive additional supports and services. Ultimately, special education policy initiatives have had unintended consequences for communities of color when those policies are implemented (Ferri & Connor, 2005).

As it relates to overrepresentation in special education, Leonardo and Broderick (2011) say that:

> By conceptualizing the problem as one of overrepresentation, there is risk of tacit reification and legitimation of the naturalness and neutrality of the bureaucratic system of special education as a whole and, by extension, of the deficit-driven and psychological

> understandings of "ability" and "disability" within which it is grounded. Like race, ability is a relational system constructs such as smartness only function by disparaging in both discursive and material ways their complement, those deemed to be uneducable and disposable. In both cases, the privileged group is provided with honor, investment, and capital, whereas the marginalized segment is dishonored and dispossessed. (p. 2208)

What the authors are saying above is complicating the very idea of overrepresentation itself. For some students to be labeled as smart, others have to be on the other end of that spectrum. Describing the problem simply as disproportionality ignores all the other historical, structural, and systemic ways that our schools work to disenfranchise and devalue students and families of color. Lastly, due to the convergence of our student's identities – race, class, gender, ability-status- they also experience intersectional violence in special education. The violence they experience are not based on one piece of their identities, it is a combination of how we perceive and treat them based on all of them. In the next section, I will describe reasons this research area is necessary.

**Need**

Of the current research, there are some studies available which include the perspectives of school districts, researchers, and teachers who are working to address overrepresentation of students of color in special education. There is less research available on the work and impact of central office staff. There is a wide array of studies that include the perspectives and experiences of dis/abled students and families. The data generated from this study can add to the current body of knowledge about the lived experiences of parents, teachers, central office staff, and myself as the researcher and a district staff member. In addition to including the perspectives of teachers who are have the most interaction with students in schools, this dissertation will include the

perspectives of parents and community members who have personal connections to the students outside of the school. Although results from this study may not be generalizable to all school districts because of the differences in student population, the results of this research can provide other school districts a framework to consider when evaluating their own special education programs.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to highlight the kinds of experiences students and their family's experience in special education related to humanization and violence. By including the voices of teachers and district staff, the goal of this dissertation is to uncover examples of the kinds of pathologization, invisibilization, and humanization of our students and their parents. In addition to gaining a better understanding of how special education district staff are working to both reproduce and disrupt the violent exclusion of students of color in special education, this study will include the voices and experiences of parent community members who understand the experiences of dis/abled youth personally. Through narrative interviews, a personal memo reflection log, and review of artifacts, the goal of this qualitative study is to uncover systems and structures that district office staff utilize in order to better support school site teams and IEP teams during discussions of more restrictive placements, present narratives of complicity and resistance from staff, and present counternarratives from participants. Lastly, this study aims to reveal examples of how site special education and general education teachers navigate their roles as educators, collaborate with one another, and decisions that go into making referrals for their students into more restrictive classroom settings. In addition to the school district narratives, this dissertation aims to include perspectives from those in the community- the families, parents, and guardians whose children are the ones being impacted directly. Community experiential

knowledge is important to include if the goal of this dissertation is to provide suggestions on how school district staff can better support and services students of color. This dissertation aims to better understand the types of resistance students and parents enacted within school systems. I also hope to listen to and highlight participant recommendations for districtwide changes and extend the current body of research on the work from school district and school staff.

## Research Questions

The following research questions guided the inquiry of this study:

1. What are the humanizing and pathological qualities of special education in urban school districts?
2. What kinds of violence do dis/abled students and their families experience within special education?
3. How do parents/family members of students labeled with dis/abilities respond to mistreatment by the school district and engage in advocacy and activism?

## Theoretical Framework

I plan to center my research using Disability Studies Critical Race Theory (DisCrit). In this section, I will begin by giving a brief background of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Disability Studies (DS), the frameworks that DisCrit extends from. Then I will describe DisCrit, its main tenets and ideas, and discuss why I choose to use this theoretical framework.

### *Understanding Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Disability Studies (DS)*

Since the passing of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), overturning the separate but equal doctrine, public schools have become more segregated by race, class, and ability (Brown & Jackson, 2013). By the 1970s, Brown and Jackson (2013) says a cadre of scholars and lawyers sought to challenge the dominant legal narratives, which they felt were objective processes

which legitimized oppressive social orders. Within spaces they created, such as the Critical Legal Studies (CLS) conference, these legal scholars formulated Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT was the culmination of many who were dissatisfied with traditional ideas and discussions about race, inequality, and civil rights discourses. Articles by Alan Freeman (1978) and Derrick Bell (1980) were foundational in CRT, pointing out ideas like racism and racial oppression being embedded in traditional legal thinking, the idea of racial discrimination motivation versus intent, interest convergence and racial realism.

As a framework, CRT has five tenets: counter-storytelling, the permanence of racism, whiteness as property, interest conversion, and the critique of liberalism. These tenets can be used to analyze the different forms of social inequities reinforced through school institutions (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1998). In addition, CRT promotes the concept of intersectionality, an idea first put forth by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995) as the need to focus on the intersections of gender and race to highlight the multiple identity and experiences. Racism, under CRT, is seen as normal and ordinary, manifests differently in various contexts, is complex, and are perpetuated in order to reproduce various power structures. Additionally, Leonardo (2009) says that whiteness is a socially constructed and malleable identity and that there are systems in place (legally, socially, politically) in America that work to benefit those that are seen as white and work to exclude others that are not.

CRT has been instrumental in exposing racism in legal decisions, challenging ahistoricism in social, economic and historical contexts, and focusing on experiential knowledge of people of color in order to challenge the dominant narrative. However, CRT has left out critical aspects of identity that excludes pockets of individuals. One group that has been left out in the CRT discussion has been those individuals with dis/abilities.

Just as race is seen as socially constructed, dis/ability can also be seen as such, with the assumption of the norm-referenced average, socially constructed, constantly contested and redefined, and both operate as a way to define, categorize, and oppress (Gillborn, 2015). As such, Disability Studies (DS) is a branch of studies that examines the idea of dis/ability a socially constructed concept, changing with the times and moods of the political climates. DS focuses on how dis/abilities are ultimately defined by who have the power to define and categorize, the concept of the norm, and rejecting ideas that individuals need to be fixed, cured, and saved from their dis/ability. Initially DS focused on the division between impairment and dis/ability, where impairment was seen as an deficiency of an individual's body or mind and dis/ability was seen as a social construct. This eventually gave way to the social and medical models of dis/ability. Although DS includes work about dis/ability history, theory and legislation, the focus has always focused on the experiences of the individual and on increasing access to civil rights for this community (Annamma, Boelé, Moore, & Klingner, 2013). DS encourages society us to see someone with a dis/ability as an individual and not define them based on their deficits. Attempts to bridge CRT and DS have been made to reflect how both branches of studies focus on the othered, the normed body, and categorization based on arbitrary scientific distinctions (Annamma et al., 2013). The next section describes DisCrit as its own body of knowledge.

### *Disability Studies Critical Race Theory (DisCrit)*

Both CRT and DS theorize about the ways that racism and ableism work together in society and examine the ways that students are simultaneous raced and dis/abled (Harry & Klinger, 2006). Scholars engaging in DisCrit think about how race and dis/ability, racism and ableism, are built into the discourses and institutions of education, affecting specific populations of students in harmful ways more than others. DisCrit can trace its lineage from black and

critical race feminism and from critiques of special education. In 1989, Crenshaw described that the law by itself could not account for the experiences of discrimination of Black women since it was based on gender and race singularly. In her 1991 article, Crenshaw said that the interlocking forms of oppressions created unique barriers for Black women in workspaces, which made making legal claims of discrimination as either a woman or a person of color difficult. Scholars in DisCrit also critique the field of special education, saying that this system produces unequal experiences for students of color and white students. Critiques in special education has led to studying topics such as disproportionality (Dunn, 1968), the achievement gap (Ladson-Billings, 2006) and the school to prison pipeline (Wald & Losen, 2003).

DisCrit includes seven tenets: 1) racism and ableism circulate interdependently (and often invisibly), 2) valuing multidimensional identities and troubling singular notions of identity, 3) emphasizes social construction of disability and race, as well as the material and psychological impacts, 4) privileges voices of marginalization and counter-narrative, 5) considers legal and historical aspects of disability and race and how they have been used to deny rights to some, 6) recognizes whiteness and ability as property (and thus gains for disabled people have been made by white, middle-class interests), and 7) requires activism and supports resistance in all its forms.

DisCrit questions who draw the lines between the two categories and recognizes that this line is often redrawn, is arbitrary, unstable, and can be changed rapidly. As a theoretical framework, scholars can utilize DisCrit to analyze particular situations. In addition, DisCrit can be used by educators as a methodological tool in their classrooms to enable and empower their students. Using DisCrit, educators can critique a situation and unmask and expose the normalizing processes of racism and ableism as they circulate around our school.

## Significance

As stated earlier, the topic of disproportionate representation has been widely studied and previous research studies has indicated that students of color are disproportionately referred and placed in segregated settings. Outcomes for students of color have not improved since the inception of special education. Though theories on causes and solutions for disproportionality have been proposed, there are only a small collective of research available that include the perspectives of central office staff and teachers seeking to disrupt these trends. This research study aims to include additional perspectives from the families and students in the community who are the ones impacted by the actions of those in the school districts. The study will hopefully generate findings that can be used to add to the current body of literature and support school districts and special education departments to continue making positive impact for students of color in special education.

## Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this dissertation, the definitions below are defined in my own words, adapted from their formal definitions in the ways that I understand and use them.

**13 Disability Categories-** As defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the 13 eligibility categories are: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Emotional Disturbance, Deaf-Blindness, Deafness, Hard of Hearing, Intellectual Disability, Multiple Disabilities, Other Health Impairment, Orthopedic Impairment, Specific Learning Disability, Speech or Language Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury, and Visual Impairment.

**Emotional Disturbance (ED):** One of the 13 eligibility categories under IDEA, labeling students with an inability to function socially or emotionally, difficulty with social skills, emotional regulation, and self-management.

**Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE):** Law that guarantees students are given the appropriate services and support based on their needs, as guaranteed by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990.

**General Education (GE):** A term to describe a regular classroom for all students, taught by someone with a multiple subject's credential at the elementary school level, and by someone with a single-subject credential (i.e. math, science) at the secondary level.

**Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA):** Legislation passed in 1990, previously known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) from 1975, with the goal of giving children with disabilities the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers. This larger piece of legislation includes elements describing the Individual Education Program (IEP) progress, the rights of all children to receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), procedural rights of the family, among others.

**Individual Education Plan (IEP):** A document which is updated annual that details the students strengths, needs, goals, and services, which is developed by a team of experts who know the student, including the family, teachers, specialists, school administrator, etc.

**Intellectual Disability (ID):** One of the 13 eligibility categories under IDEA, indicating a student has reduced general intellectual functioning.

**Least Restrictive Environment (LRE):** Provision in the IDEA which states that children should be educated in a setting with non-disabled peers as much as possible. School districts typically offer a range of options, ranging from general education, separate classes, separate schools, residential and hospital, with the continuum going from least to most restrictive.

**Non-Public School (NPS)-** Non-public schools are specialized private schools. School districts can contract with or parents can privately place/pay for their children. Non-public schools are entirely segregated school settings which provides education to students with disabilities. They can be for-profit or non-profit. There are both residential and day-treatment programs.

**Other Health Impairment (OHI):** One of the 13 eligibility categories under IDEA, encompassing many health issues such as attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), asthma, diabetes, epilepsy, etc.

**Resource Specialist Program (RSP):** Used to refer to both a program and a staff member. The program is designed to provide students with partial day special education services via push-in or pullout model. It is also used to describe the special education teacher, who holds and runs a school sites program.

**Special Day Class (SDC):** A classroom for students labeled with disabilities, located at a regular school site, taught by a special education teacher. SDCs are referred to as a Separate Day Class and self-contained classroom.

**Specific Learning Disability (SLD):** One of the 13 eligibility categories under IDEA, indicating that a student has a disorder in one or more of the basic phonological processes involved with using and understanding language, such as dyslexia and visual-processing delays.

**Speech or Language Impairment (SLI):** One of the 13 eligibility categories under IDEA, indicated by student's different communication abilities.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to review the current and historical research on disproportionality in special education, inclusive practices in school districts, central office and teacher perspectives on dis/ability, and various anti-racist and anti-ableist pedagogies. Since the body of knowledge in this area is expansive and long-standing, the scope of inquiry was narrowed down to focus on important historical studies, literature that included analysis of culture, history, and power, and references that directly addressed central office and teacher perspectives related to disproportionality. In addition to summarizing, analyzing, and critiquing the available literature, the aim of this literature review is to provide a foundation of research in which the present study emerges from.

The literature review is organized into three broad sections, each of which has an introduction summarizing its contents. The first section explores historical studies and data on disproportionate representation in special education, justification of and proposed solutions to the phenomenon, and on the idea of least restrictive environment (LRE), a concept from federal law that guide and fuel the trajectories of many students of color into more restrictive settings. The second section focuses on inclusion in school districts and perspectives from teachers on race and ability. The third section will include a review of literature that utilizes DisCrit as a humanizing lens as well as pedagogies that are both anti-racist and humanizing.

### Disproportionate Representation in Special Education

To begin, this section will review general literature on the topic of disproportionate representation in special education from 1968 until now, focusing on the key arguments and most relevant literature. Although the topic has been discussed and studied for over fifty years, the explanation for the problem and solutions suggested has remained remarkably similar

through the years. With such a wide breadth of literature spanning this timeframe, I was selective in which literature to review. I will first describe what disproportionate representation is. Then, I will discuss the research on disproportionality from the late 1960s to now, focusing on work by authors who included analysis on race and ability in their writing.

Disproportionate representation is described as the difference between the percentage of a group in special education being larger or smaller than the percentage of that group within the educational system as a whole. Disproportionality is problematic because students from ethnically, linguistically, and racially diverse backgrounds are typically over identified for special education services, which Cruz and Rodl (2018) suggests as bias in the referral, placement, and assessment processes. Artiles et al. (2010) says overrepresentation can also be viewed as a symptom of larger issues in society, connected to the historically discriminatory policies and ways we have treated our communities of color. Chamberlain (2006) argues that the built-in racism of our schooling systems works particularly against our communities of color, and is a bias that continuously gets expressed in the American educational system. Disproportionality points to larger social, cultural, and historical issues related to racism, ableism, and the oppression of certain groups of individuals. Artiles and Trent (1994) believe that students of color have always been overrepresented in special education but available data and agreement on what causes this has not always been agreed upon.

The issue of disproportionality by race and ethnicity in special education was first written about by Dunn in 1968. Dunn argued for curricular revisions and adjustment to the placement of students labeled as Intellectually Disabled (ID)[4]. Dunn estimated that 60% to 80% of students

[4] In 2010, Rosa's Law was signed into law by President Barack Obama, which replaced the term Mentally Retarded (MR) with Intellectually Disabled (ID). Prior to 2010, authors and scholars referred to individuals as MR, however, for the purposes of using a more humanizing and updated term within this dissertation, all of references to MR will be updated to Intellectually Disabled (ID) instead.

labeled as ID placed in these segregated classrooms came from low socio-economic homes. Furthermore, due legislation in compulsory education, special education was created and this group of students were segregated into separate programs and classes. Dunn (1968) was critical of the labeling process, specifically with the use of standardized testing that labeled students as ID. Deno (1970) extended Dunn's disproportionately argument, saying the field of special education had a preoccupation with labeling and placing students. In addition, Deno (1970) critiqued the medical model of special education, which placed an overwhelming emphasis on the defects that resided within an individual and shifted focus away from external variables that educators could address. Decades later, Artiles and Trent (1994) critiqued Dunn's initial study, saying they overused the medical model to justify restructuring assessments and belief that the general education setting had improved enough to the point of supporting learners of all types. Furthermore, Artiles and Trent (1994) critiqued Deno's arguments for failing to acknowledge that educational landscapes remained the same despite recent educational mandates and that special education, not general education, had the potential to fully reform education.

In these early days of research, many factors were attributed to leading to disproportionality in special education. The Coleman report was written in 1966 during the time of the civil rights movement and reviewed the complex disparities between white and black students in public schools and inequality in academic achievement. The report described racial integration, family involvement, and student mindset as important factors that could lead to disparities. The Coleman report (1966) hypothesized that disadvantaged African American children learned better in integrated classrooms, which fueled the mass bussing of students to achieve racial balance in public schools.

Contributing to the issue of disproportionality were struggles to define and structure the field of special education. Between 1974-1978, the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) collected data on students in Ohio and found that many of the students assigned to Intellectually Disabled (ID) classes were never formally assessed using reliable tools. Consequently, the OCR study found students identified with limited English proficiency were also placed into special education programs without proper assessments. Studies throughout the 1970s and 1980s concluded similar findings when looking at different school districts and schools. Depending on who reports and writes about it, the analysis can vary between authors. Before 1975, key legislation against school districts such as *Diana* (1970) and *Guadalupe* (1972) centered on inadequate assessments and placements of students. After 1975, cases like *Larry P* (1979) and *Marshall* (1984) focused on the constructions of intellectual dis/abilities, fairness in testing, classification of students, changes to definitions of ID, and creation of programs for the ID population. Artiles and Trent (1994) attribute those legislations and the following as factors that impact overrepresentation: controversy and debate about constructs of dis/ability, the existence biased procedures, and biased referral and assessments.

Likewise, Meier, Stewart, and England's 1989 empirical documentation and evaluation study looked at 170 large school districts and reviewed common obstacles for African American students. Their main argument and suggestion for improving educational achievement for African American students was to have more African American teachers in the classroom. Next, the U.S. Department of Education's 1992 report cited reasons African American students were more highly represented in dis/ability categories were due to poor prenatal, perinatal, or postnatal health care and a lack of early childhood nutrition, resulting in dis/abilities in the child.

In 2017, Kramarczuk Voulgarides, Fergus, and King Thorius said that all attributing factors to disproportionality can fit into two categories: practice-based and socio-demographics. Examples of practice-based factors are lack of appropriate academic intervention, failed implementation of poor systems, gaps in curriculum and instructional implementation, limited beliefs about student's ability, and inconsistent pre-referral processes. School interventions to address practiced-based inadequacies are systems like Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tier Systems of Supports (MTSS) and support for students prior to making a referral to special education. Unfortunately, Annamma et al. (2013) said these tiered intervention systems are not student, culturally, or historically centered, focus on inadequate instruction or specific classroom environments, and places the deficits within the child. These interventions are constructed in ways change or treat their supposed defects.

The second broad category leading to disproportionality suggested by Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al. (2017) is socio-demographics. This refers to the cultural mismatch between the students, teachers, administrators, school systems, and overall misalignment of student racial, ethnic, socio-economic differences. All of these factors contribute to the over referral, assessment and identification of students of color into special education. The cultural mismatch between students and school staff defaults whiteness as the norm. When students deviate cognitively, behavioral, or socially, it drives staff to suggest referrals and assessments. Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson, and Wu (2006) discussed socio-demographic reasons that lead many white teachers to not understand their students of color. This misunderstanding of student behaviors and attitudes, coupled with their perception that special education classes have more appropriate supports and services, lead many white teachers thinking segregated classrooms are better suited to teach their students of color.

Since Dunn's 1968 article, many scholars have engaged in, provided suggestions and solutions for, theorized about, and criticized from multiple angles the problem of overrepresentation. Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al. (2017) says that half a century later, the problem of overrepresentation of students of color in special education, labeled with dis/abilities, and placed in segregated and separate settings continues. Below, I will discuss studies and arguments on the justifications for disproportionality.

### *Justification for Overrepresentation*

There is literature which justifies the data on disproportionality and minimizes the significance of the issue. I include these studies to shed light on how educators justify the problem instead of addressing it. Artiles et al. (2010) describes the three arguments that exist, which oversimplifies the issue: the poverty hypothesis, the benefits of special education outweighing the dis/ability label, and better outcomes for students who receive special education services.

First, Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Sibb, Rausch, Cuadrado, and Chung (2008) writes that the poverty hypothesis suggests that there is a correlation between poverty and low academic performance. The logic here being that children from historically underserved populations live in poverty and are more likely to fail in school. Several studies suggest poor academic performance is related to poverty, declining health, erosion of family life, and living in urban areas. For example, Natriello, McDill, and Pallas (1990) reviewed how the term disadvantaged evolved over a fifty-year period and suggested that disadvantaged children were more likely to be dis/abled. On the other hand, Donovan and Gross (2002) say that although these students live in poverty and may experience difficulties acquiring academic or socio-emotional skills, their needs may stem from higher needs rather than a disabling condition. Skiba et al. (2008) rebutted the

poverty hypothesis, saying that poverty makes a weak contribution to the prediction of disproportionality across a number of dis/ability categories. However, it is common that new research ignores this statement and continue connecting poverty as the single attribute to dis/ability labels. Unfortunately, Artiles and Trent (1994) says, stereotypes about the abilities of children of color, especially the ones who were living in poverty, fueled and perpetuated their placements into special education classes. The poverty hypotheses ignore the structural and historical factors that lead to intergenerational poverty and suggest unidimensional situations instead of seeing the issue within a larger socio-historical content.

Next, Artiles et al. (2010) says that although the passage of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 was thought to be an achievement for all dis/abled students, the law did not include explicit protections for students of color. After the passage of IDEA, Mercer and Richardson (1975) found there was increased representation of African American students in special education. Additionally, Trent (2003) argued that the desegregation of African American communities in the 1960s led to compromised abilities for African American parents to advocate for their children. Furthermore, Ferri and Connor (2005) found that English Language Learners (ELLs) were more likely than English-speaking students to be placed in separate classrooms and labeled with a Speech and Language Impairment (SLI) despite additional procedures to support the pre-referral, referral, identification, and assessment of ELLs. These examples show that even with special education services, unintended consequences from policy initiatives affect students of color.

Lastly, those who justify disproportionality argue that outcomes for students who receive special education services are better, however, additional data and studies show otherwise. To start, Cortiella (2007) found that student performance on statewide assessments were lower for

students with dis/abilities. Kemp (2006) described dropout rates as considerably higher for students in special education. Looking at student graduation rates, Kirby (2017) found that students receiving special education services gradated at a lower rate, 63.9% instead of the national average of 81%. Of that 63.9% of students who graduated from high school, only 39.6% received a high school diploma, says the US Department of Education (2014). In 2011-2012, 20.5% of students labeled with dis/abilities dropped out of high school, compared to 7% of students who did not have an IEP. Moreover, Zablocki and Krezmien (2013) found that students with dis/abilities had many qualities similar with those would be considered at-risk for dropping out of school such as lower rates of engagement with the school, prior retention and history of disciplinary issues. While overall outcomes for students in special education have improved over the years, it cannot be generalized and oversimplified that students who receive special education services are doing better because of their IEPs. Next, I will review solutions that have been proposed over time to address disproportionality in special education.

### *Differing Viewpoints on Solutions*

Over time, scholars have presented different solutions as to how to address and disrupt disproportionality of students of color in special education. Beginning in 1968, Dunn proposed changes to two broad areas of special education: systemic procedures and curriculum. Dunn (1968) argued for using a more clinical approach with diagnosing, placing, and instructing, so different learners be educated in a mainstream setting. In addition, Dunn acknowledged the need for better teacher preparation programs, curricular changes and deeper collaboration between special and general educators. Early on, scholars engaging in research on disproportionality such as Dunn looked for general patterns and focused on single variables such as a student's race or class. In addition, special education during this time was preoccupied with normative models.

Students from working-class families were thought of to be socio-culturally deprived and special education was necessary for them.

Studies in the 1980s, such as the one by Holtzman, Messick, and National Research Council (1982) provided similar recommendations including appropriate and preventative interventions for students having difficulty in school as well as additional teacher support and training. Additionally, research by Finn (1982) looked at student demographic and economic characteristics as predictors for placement into special education. Finn (1982) suggested that since educators had little control over those characteristics, certain students of colors were more likely to be labeled as Intellectually Disabled (ID) or Emotionally Disturbed (ED).

In the 1990s, scholars were suggesting solutions that included programmatic changes as well as changes relating to cultural sensitivity. Scholars argued that services should address students' unique needs and include solutions that were unique to each community's strengths, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Artiles and Trent (1994) proposed a multipronged solution to address disproportionality. Their proposed solutions are as follows: advocacy, policy reform, systems reform, additional preparation and training for educators, research into and use of culturally relevant practices, and refinement of concepts in special education. Most importantly, Artiles and Trent (1994) suggested further research into the perspectives of diverse populations of children and ways social interaction and classroom instruction are impacted with a diverse classroom.

The 1997 reauthorization of the IDEA was the first time the federal law officially recognized disproportionality and established a specific approach to gathering data. Hehir (2002) says the new regulations did not provide school districts sufficient direction on how to collect this kind of data. Salend and Garrick Duhanney (2005) reported that it was not until 1999 that the

Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) provided additional information on data collection methods. In 2004 with the reauthorization of IDEA, language was added for districts to monitor the issue, set aside a percentage of their budget for interventions, and to publicly report on the revision of their policies and practices.

Green, Cohen, and Stormont (2019) provided four action items for school districts looking to address disproportionality: establish equity teams, create or reevaluate their policies, support evidence-based decision making, and use disaggregated data in order to find solutions. These ideas, while seemingly straight-forward for school district officials to utilize, are too broad and ignore the underlying issues that lead to issues such as disproportionality. Green et al. (2019) said that to establish an equity team on campus would be problematic as it would delete the responsibility to a small group of individuals, rather than have everyone have ownership. Furthermore, discipline policies that do not specifically name anti-racist and anti-ablest intensions could fall flat.

Despite the procedural protections in IDEA, disproportionate patterns for students with non-dominant racial and linguistic identities continues. Losen, Ee, Hodson, and Martinez (2015) and Hyman, Rivkin, and Rosenbaum (2011) all expressed that if students were being educated and disciplined equally and fairly, then provisions in federal law would be unnecessary. Klingner et al. (2005) argued for addressing disproportionality through culturally responsive educational systems. For school districts to help student succeed, analysis should be completed on student learning, beliefs about teacher learning and change, the local school contexts, and finally the community demographics. Furthermore, an analysis of power and hegemony can uncover the presumed race-neutral structures in our schools. Tate (1995) described how issues of oppression and hegemony can heavily impact non-white student opportunities in general education as well

as with special education referral and placement procedures. Mainstream educators typically view students through a white middle-class normative lens of competence. Therefore, oftentimes non-white students' performance and experience in schools are not always aligned within such parameters. Klingner et al. (2005) said the goal of making transparent the ideologies and barriers to learning and academic success can be the technical solution that many are looking for.

Although disproportionality has been discussed and framed as a technical issue in education that can be fixed through interventions, Artiles et al. (2010) said that this view is problematic as it ignores the historical, contextual, and structural forces involved. Much like the medical model of special education, Artiles and Bal (2008) added that the technical view of special education places deficits within an individual and believes they can be fixed. Artiles and Bal (2008) said the reauthorization of IDEA, which included recognition of disproportionality did little to address the colorblind ideology of IDEA and history of racial tensions in America. The technical solutions suggested for districts and teachers all ignore the inequalities that are linked to complex histories of anti-blackness. By utilizing these technical solutions, educators can deal with disproportionality symbolically but allow for inequalities to persist. As Dumas and Ross (2016) argued:

> Sentiments that are anti-black influence racialized policies that does not focus on a concern about disproportionality or inequality, but also, fundamentally and quite specifically, a concern with the bodies of Black people, the signification of their Blackness, and the threat posed by the Black to the educational well-being of other students. (p. 12)

Despite these additions and new procedural protections for students, IDEA continues to be a race-neutral policy as it does not explicitly attend to racial, ethnic, and cultural differences. In

regards to the colorblindness of special education policies, Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al. (2017) said:

> On the surface, IDEA is a race-neutral policy. Although recognition of disproportionality through IDEA highlights a race-based outcome, the remedies, procedural protections, and interventions embedded in IDEA do not explicitly attend to racial, ethnic, and cultural differences. Thus, the race-neutral approach embedded in IDEA contributes to an understanding of disability that is separate from race and therefore racialized outcomes are located within an individual rather than in systems of oppression. This individual-centered and race-neutral approach limits the ability of research-based interventions to eliminate disproportionate outcomes in special education. (p. 72)

In summary, scholars have presented solutions to address disproportionality such as changing policy, shifting deficit mindsets of student abilities, and resurfacing the race-neutral policies that have detrimental impacts on our students of color. In the next subsection, I will review the impacts the concept of least restrictive environment has on students of color.

### *Consequences of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)*

The ambiguity of special education laws fuels the placement of students into more restrictive settings and contributes to the overrepresentation of students of color in segregated classrooms. In this section, I will review the literature around the concept of least restrictive environment (LRE), the history of the policy, how it is implemented and used in the schools against students of color, and describe studies that look at the benefits and drawbacks of learning in an inclusive setting.

To begin, the concept of least restrictive environment (LRE), forward thinking for its time, created a continuum of alternative placements. Far from requiring students with

dis/abilities to be educated in regular classrooms, LRE leaves this determination and decision on educational professionals. While praised by many for opening educational opportunities for dis/abled peoples, LRE has also been criticized helping to maintain the segregation of students from regular classrooms.

Taylor's (1988) main criticisms of the least restrictive environment (LRE) principle are that it legitimates restrictive environments, confuses segregation and integration on the one hand with intensity of services on the other, is based on a readiness model, supports the primacy of professional decision making, sanctions infringements on people's rights, implies that people must move as they develop and change, and directs attention to physical settings rather than to the services and supports people need to be integrated into the community. Favoring LRE is not the same as mandating it, implying that there are circumstances in which more restrictive placements are more appropriate. As long as there is a continuum of services, some will ultimately end up in the most restrictive environments. Common misperceptions that least restrictive settings are unable to provide more intensive services supports the idea that individuals with severe dis/abilities can only be educated in the most restrictive and segregated settings. Next, those with dis/abilities are expected to earn their right to move into less restrictive settings, implying the need for them to graduate from the segregated setting and move into the integrating setting. Unfortunately, many restrictive settings are not preparing people for less restrictive lives. LRE as it is written preferences professional judgments over those of family members, who know the individuals best. Lastly, Taylor (1988) says that LRE obscures basic issues of community integration and acceptance of those with different abilities and implies not whether people with dis/abilities should be restricted but by to what extent.

Sauer and Jorgensen (2016) says that the least restrictive environment (LRE) concept was forward thinking for its time but it led to problematic policies and practices that work against students with dis/abilities. In the 1960s, individuals with dis/abilities existed mostly in state-operated institutions, special schools or centers, and leaders in the field of special education advocated for community and societal integration. Federal courts began addressing the rights of dis/abled people and incorporating the principles of LRE. LRE's origins draw on the idea that the government needed to ensure options were available for individuals with dis/abilities, options that least intruded or infringed upon individual right. *Milk v Board of D.C.* (1972) laid the groundwork for zero reject mandate in special education law, ordering that all students with dis/abilities needed to be admitted to the public schools in Washington DC. Likewise, in *Pennsylvania Association of for Retarded Children (PARC) v Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1972) the decision of the court stated placements for dis/abled students preferable in a regular school over special schools or other types of programs. Unfortunately, the vagueness of this court decision, specifically, the usage of the word preferable instead of required, is one of the remaining legacies of LRE. Due to verbiage in this court case, LRE has been misinterpreted since then and leads to the current understanding of inclusion today.

Moreover, there is a misguided link between intensity of services and more restrictive environments. Sauer and Jorgensen (2016) say that often times, intensity of needs for students labeled with dis/abilities such as Intellectual Disabilities (ID) were used as justification for alternative placements in separate schools. The least restrictive environment (LRE) concept continues to be used to justify the segregation of certain students despite the accumulated research that says students can be successful in general education classrooms with non-dis/abled peers as long as they have proper support. For example, in a study by Fisher and Meyer (2002),

forty students in two groups were accessed across two years of inclusive versus self-contained programming. Social competence and independent behavior scores for students in the inclusive groups made small gains as compared to the self-contained group.

Far from requiring that students with dis/abilities be educated in general education classes, least restrictive environment (LRE) concept leaves the determination about what constitutes LRE to each IEP team. Early work by Taylor (1988) critically analyzed the LRE continuum, debunked the myths around LRE and explained the pitfalls. Taylor (1988) advocated for inclusion into the community for individuals with dis/abilities with the assumption that inclusion was a civil right. He saw the LRE continuum as a policy that had received little critical analysis, which ultimately placed severely dis/abled people into the most restrictive environments with no access to the community. Taylor (1988) proposed a new community-based continuum in the areas of residential, special education, and vocational. With this proposal, Taylor rejected the traditional education continuum and the notion that segregated settings prepared people to function in integrated settings. His new continuum envisioned a range of services and completely eliminated segregated environments.

Inclusive education reflects the values and principles concerned with challenging the ways in which educational systems reproduce and perpetuate social inequalities for marginalized and excluded groups of students. Inclusive education encompasses the practice of mainstreaming and the idea of full inclusion. Mainstreaming, employed since 1975, allows for students with dis/abilities to participate in the general education classroom for parts of the day. In practice, many students mainstream only during PE, art or electives for social purposes. In contrast, inclusion and full inclusion share the philosophy that students benefiting academically and socially by staying in the general education classroom for a majority of the day, despite their

ability status. Sailor and Roger (2005) says full inclusion should be a zero-reject policy with natural proportions of dis/abled and non-dis/abled students in each classroom, age-appropriate placements, no self-contained separate classrooms, and special education supports embedded and integrated into the learning environments. Villa et al. (2005) add that inclusion is not a placement but a philosophy and a belief that all students should be valued. Separate placements in special education goes against the inclusive model of education. Special Day Classrooms (SDCs) are taught by special education teachers and are considered more restrictive because students are in a separate setting and away from their non-dis/abled peers.

Villa et al. (2005) described traditionalists as people who ask if inclusion works and reconceptualists as people who ask what needs to be done to make inclusion work. Traditionalists, believing the field of special education was sound, mostly favored incremental improvements and would question inclusion as a meaningless, catchall phrase. The work by traditionalists is mostly presented as non-ideological but in doing so, also reifies dis/ability. Reconceptualists on the other hand, argued that special education was a flawed system and advocated for larger changes in the field, which would shift the focus away from labels and on caring for all students. The two different perspectives in special education symbolize the split over the issue of inclusion.

The following studies describe the impacts of inclusion for students with dis/abilities. First, Jones and Hensley (2012) looked at the experiences of students in special education classrooms and reported students had lower levels of self-confidence, were perceived by teachers as less independent and had less self-determination. Next, Lackaye, Margalit, Ziv, and Ziman (2006) reported students in self-contained classrooms had similar feelings such as lower levels of self-efficacy, lower levels of hope for the future, and stigma from peers and teachers.

Furthermore Ryndak et al. (2014) found that students in self-contained classrooms had less opportunities throughout their school day to observe and interact in natural settings, engaged with same-age peers less and learned less academically, communication and social skills. Interestingly, teachers in Jones and Hensley's 2012 study expressed that students in their self-contained classrooms became over reliant on adult support, asking for help on tasks that they were able to do independently. On the other hand, Jones and Hensly (2012) found that students reported positive things such as feeling a sense of community with their peers and teachers in the self-contained classrooms.

As it relates to culture, race, language, and dis/ability, Blanchett et al. (2009) discuss why these topics are issues that affect urban education and the implications for students, families, and those advocating for better ways to serve them. Due to the nature of school systems placing deficits within the child, students of color and those living in poverty are at higher risk for many things. Assumptions of students living in poverty automatically leading to low learning potential have been dismissed. Donovan and Gross (2002) add that poor children have academic risks but school structures and opportunities are the facts that ultimately place these students at higher risk.

Gillborn (2015) found that African American students were overwhelmingly labeled as Emotionally Disturbed (ED) over their white peers. Harry and Klinger (2006) found that a larger number of non-dominant racial, ethnic, and linguistic students were labeled as learning dis/abled, intellectually dis/abled, or emotionally/behaviorally dis/abled. As it relates to predictors of being labeled as Emotionally Disturbed (ED), Talbott et al. (2011) found that categories females of other race, Asian American students, and Latinx students, served as negative predictors of ED, whereas Latinx male served as a positive predictor for ED. Additional positive predictors of high ED labels were found in districts with students of low-income status and teacher salary.

In summary, the studies described above show that students that are educated in self-contained classrooms could build strong relationships with peers and adults in segregated classrooms. Students can also learn important academics and life skills, while also receiving valuable opportunities to mainstream in general education settings. However, when given the opportunity to learn with typically developing peers, dis/abled students can ultimately learn more and develop a stronger sense of identity. The concept of LRE has taken the field of special education towards full inclusion and has provided opportunities for dis/abled peoples that were not available previously. On the other hand, LRE has also been used against dis/abled students and to justify their segregated learning. Next will be the second literature review section that looks at how school districts respond to address disproportionality and viewpoints from teachers on the intersections of race and dis/ability.

## School Districts and Teacher Impact

In this section, I will describe ways school districts have rethought and restructured schools to promote inclusion, include teacher perspectives on teaching students with dis/abilities and discuss recommendations scholars have put forth on promoting and increasing access for dis/abled students. Many of the studies build off previous research and follow a trend of critiquing traditional school practices, specifically around the exclusion of differences. The first subsection discusses inclusion at in school districts and the second subsection reviews teacher perspectives on race and ability.

### *Inclusion at the School District Level*

Federal education laws make tremendous impact on the local schools. Ball (2008) describes *Big-P* policies as formal policies that are legislated, created, and regulated by the government. Policies include people and programs and are meant to address a problem. The

*little-p* refers to how policies are then implemented in local contexts. Although large scale national or statewide policies are the same throughout the land, local implementation of policies change based on the context, composition of students, historical and cultural aspects of the community, which can ultimately lead to continued inequalities especially for students of color.

Using a critical policy studies perspective, Tefera and Voulgarides (2016) reviewed two ethnographic studies, one on a school district administrator-level response to disproportionality, and the other on student perspectives in taking a high-stake standardized test. As it relates to the implementation and compliance with IDEA, Tefera and Voulgarides (2016) found that compliance with timelines and legal mandates acted as a veil to outside authorities and community stakeholders, however, these legal mandates were not enough to ensure equitable outcomes in the local contexts. Local districts had their own norms, biases, histories, and opinions on students with differences and dis/abilities. A school district's specific social context greatly impacts how disproportionality and inequality is understood and addressed. Ultimately, principles in policies that are aimed to provide equality may have damaging and discriminating effects on racial minority students. Blanket policy guidelines along with complicated local situations both contribute to the reproduction of inequalities in our schools.

Policies in special education included contradictory racialization effects, giving access and services to those who can exploit the laws in their favor, and further disenfranchise traditionally oppressed groups. Local policy makers are strained with complying with policies although many of the implementation strategies lead to further inequities. In order to disrupt these cycles, local norms, biases, practices, and particularities of that community need to be considered. Local leaders cannot shy away from conversations, especially if they are about inequities in services or outcomes for students. Tefera and Voulgarides (2016) suggest policy

makers discontinue one-size fits all approaches to policies and include more student voice in understanding local contexts.

Honig (2006) describes central office staff as able to work with schools to enable improvement strategies despite the day-to-day formal bureaucratic structures. Tefera and Voulgarides (2016) add that educators in the central office work to implement and carry out the *little p* policies. Unlike the *Big P* policies that are federal laws drafted and passed by congress such Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Tefera and Voulgarides (2016) says the *little p* policies are ways school districts take into consideration the context of the local practices and hopefully address various biases or preferences embedded that may affect how disproportionality is understood and addressed.

In addition to understanding local contexts, including perspectives of the communities, DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2013) suggest that to increase inclusion in schools, districts should consider using data to monitor progress on student outcomes, incentivize inclusion programs as well as provide additional training and support for teachers and staff. They argue that much of the previous literature on inclusion has ignored the policy implementation process. Districts have to choose where and how they focus their energies. For example, districts cannot focus only on moving students out of non-public schools or other alternative placements only, but they need to also support public schools in being able to support more diverse students. Districts like these are similar to other ones that were able to close the achievement gap when they advocated and provided more general education access and professional development opportunities to their staff, promoting inclusion at the district level.

Zumeta (2014) says that since 2005, research in inclusive education has shifted away from supporting individual students to organizing services and supports in schools. After the first

wave of inclusive education research on students and classroom-level, the second wave starting in the year 2000 focused on strategies to be implemented the local, district, or state levels. Many researchers ran into tensions after completing their arguments about whether or not to include certain individuals. Kozleski, Artiles, and Waitoller (2014) says those tensions included the technical aspects of teaching such as curriculum, pedagogy, classroom structures and routines, and tensions among educators about the democratic and inclusive aspects of education versus the economic investment necessities for globalization.

In order to help school's rethink their structures and bolster instruction, Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Bull, Cosier, and Dempf-Aldrich (2011) engaged in a university and school district partnership. The partnership included careful selection of specific schools, professional development for site staff, survey data, and interviews with staff. Outcomes included more mainstreaming time for students with IEPs, increase in adult perceptions that inclusion benefits all students, higher collaborating rates between general education and special education teachers, and improved instruction for all students. Barriers that were identified included time for collaboration, impact of negative teacher attitudes, and the need for a shared school vision on inclusion.

Bornstein (2017) looked at an urban school district that was cited for excessive and disproportionate suspensions by race and dis/ability. Dis/ability, which some view as deviance, manifests in schools as ableism, which sets expectations for how students should behave. Traditional disciplinary systems often penalize students with dis/ability labels without the examination of race or ability. As this urban school district developed guidelines for Positive Behavior Intervention Systems (PBIS) as a solution, meetings included stakeholders on how to implement the new practices. When all the stakeholders came together for the planning meeting,

it was clear that certain voices were more valued by the group. Perspectives from folx[5] of color and parents were less heard and professional opinions such as clinical assessments from school psychologist more valued by the group. School officials were hesitant on including family voices and directly addressing issues relating to race. Unfortunately, race and racism were touchy subjects for this group of individuals, most of whom were white.

Artiles and Kozleski (2007) argue that inclusive education research must be looked at within the context of cultural histories and practices in society as well as the ways that differences are considered and treated. When discussing inclusive education in the United States, most of the focus tends to be on students with dis/abilities, not other identity markers such as race or class. The benefits of inclusive education can often leave out poor, ethnic, and linguistically diverse groups of students. The objective towards inclusion for dis/abled students, while meaningful and important, has left out ethnic and linguistic minorities whose complex histories in local schools over the course of many generations have not allowed them the same opportunities as others.

To support the success of inclusive education, Artiles and Kozleski (2007) suggest a shift in focus from access and participation of students in general education with dis/abilities to access, participation, and outcomes for students who have histories of enduring marginalization due to racial identities or ability levels. This shift in focus would be grounding for our understanding of student experiences, the cultural-historical legacies that are woven into the social fabric of schooling, and reframe the focus of inclusive education. Additionally, the questions about who benefits from inclusive education are the question about whose experiences are centered and who are at the margins. Inclusive education and the communities that value them need to define who is positioned at the center and at the margins if the aim is produce better outcomes for those who

[5] I use to term folx instead of folks in solidarity and to be inclusive all people, specifically queer people of color.

have been historically underserved. In other words, inclusive education must name injustices, discuss current practices, and engage in questions that can guide and shape the work within school communities. The next subsection will zoom in and focus specifically on the perspectives of teachers and their perceptions about dis/ability and race.

### *Teacher Perspectives on Race and Ability*

In this section, I will review literature related to teacher perspectives on race and ability. Multiple studies have found that teachers are more inclusive of dis/abled students if they have a general understanding and are taught ways to implement Universal-Design for Learning (UDL) strategies. In general, teacher biases are influenced from their prior teaching and life experiences. In order to teach dis/abled youth, it is important for teachers to view student identities holistically and not in a vacuum.

Fergus (2010) describes deficit thinking as the dominant ideology that is reproduced within American educational systems. This is not to fault individual teachers but is a part of the social fabric in schools. By analyzing teacher beliefs, constructs about race and culture and how they intersect with teacher beliefs, the author connected teacher responses to their expectations of student achievement and their own self-efficacy as educators. Over 700 teachers responded and results from the survey revealed that teachers had difficulty engaging in discussions about race and cultural differences, were ambivalent to colorblind ideologies, and felt uncertainty about their responsibilities around cultural awareness. Teachers with more teaching experience or pedagogical confidence reported less deficit thinking and orientation. Deficit thinking had a positive correlation to colorblindness and racial discomfort, meaning the more deficit-oriented a teacher was, the more they reported being uncomfortable with ideologies such as colorblindness

and race. Banks (2015) found that teachers were less likely to be biased or have a deficit mindset if they had previous experiences teaching or interacting with students who were dis/abled.

As it relates to teachers and implicit bias, Gregory and Roberts (2017) discussed with teachers their beliefs about African American students, overrepresentation in special education, and discipline. Since African American students as a group are at higher risk for being disciplined and more likely to receive Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs), the authors argued that teachers not only need to be aware of the power of negative beliefs but they also needed to know that positive beliefs in students impacted outcomes as well. Results from the study indicated that the teachers unknowingly punished African American students more for misbehaviors. Furthermore, implicit bias, personal beliefs, and day to day conditions at work contribute to how teachers respond and react to their African American students. The authors elaborate that positive beliefs about students are important, strengths-based thinking can be encouraged and taught through teacher professional development and teacher support can help raise awareness away from deficit-based thinking. By encouraging and raising awareness about positive beliefs, teachers move further away from the deficit-based thinking which ultimately impacts outcomes for African American students.

Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, and Banaji (2009) said it is difficult for any adult to accept that they have may unconscious racial biases, yet teachers come into the classroom with bias and preconceived ideas based on student race, ability, and class. These ideas contribute to how teachers deliver instruction, structure their classrooms, and interact with students. Gregory and Roberts (2017) found that teachers spent more time watching their African American students, suggesting an expectancy effect, where they were more vigilant and attuned to black boys' behavior, given possible unconsciously held beliefs. This is one example of implicit bias

and something that can be discussed and corrected. Adults are typically the ones with the power in the classroom so if they are aware of their biases, it can help in decreasing deficit-based racial and ability bias.

Related to teacher beliefs on students who do not identify with the dominant group in schools, Pit-ten Cate and Glock (2018) situated their research with pre-service teachers in Germany and focused on the effect of teacher perception on student abilities. For students who were described as both dis/abled and as an immigrant, teachers believed they had lower academic proficiency. The participants in this study were pre-service teachers and the data was collected after the participants read short descriptions and profiles of different students. The results from this study showed that the students faced a double vulnerability as an immigrant and as a student of color.

Continuing on with teacher perceptions of dis/abled students, Cooc (2018) examined national data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 to understand what factors lead general education teacher to believe a student has a dis/ability and instances in which teacher colleagues would disagree. Due to the fact that teachers are often the first to refer a student for special education, the authors felt it was important to understand how they perceived students' abilities and what happens when there is disagreement among teacher colleagues. There are many contributing factors as to why teachers would make the referral for special education. Studies have seen that the referrals were made based on teachers who felt they were unable to meet the students' needs among other reasons. This particular study included data for more than 10,000 high school students. Results from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 showed that teachers disagree on student dis/ability eligibility especially when the students are African American, male, and from a lower socio-economic status. Lower academically achieving

students were also more likely to be perceived with a dis/ability. Behavior also influenced teacher opinions. Student traits and classroom factors contributed more to perceptions of student abilities than teacher professional or personal backgrounds. Teachers disagreed more when the student was more attentive in classes or if they were only disruptive in one classroom.

Young (2016) engaged her participants in thinking about the role of student teachers in replicating and intensifying race, language, and dis/ability oppression. Of the 93 pre-service teachers who completed the questionnaire, participants overwhelmingly focused on describing their students through the lens of dis/ability categories, although many of their students were students of color. Results show that student teachers are aware of their student identities, however, aspects of the student's identity related to both their dis/ability label and race are largely ignored or erased by their teachers. This discourse on the erasure of race and dis/ability points to larger issues of power and deficit theories in education. Educators can reference a particular group of students without drawing attention to descriptions of race or dis/ability, which reproduces marginality for dis/abled students. What is left unsaid is problematic because it hides the reproduction of inequality. Castagno (2008) says that this erasure by educators continues the reinforcement of multiple oppressions. By reinforcing white privilege, teachers are also reinforcing the medicalization as the primary lens for viewing students in special education and conflating culture with race, which allows educators to believe they are not using deficit models. Focusing on one aspect of a student's identity leaves out important aspects of their upbringing, background, experiences, and barriers that they encounter in their lives. For a teacher to consider dis/ability in a vacuum without including other aspects of their identities leaves their experiences incomplete which is problematic as it can lead teachers to ultimately putting the blame on the student's dis/ability instead of the structural aspects of schooling.

Additionally, Young (2016) states that teachers are aware of the students' identities, but many teachers and student teachers, like the ones in their study, are not talking about race at all. There is coded language or ways to circumvent discussing race such as trauma or behaviorally challenged instead of black. This can be detrimental to students and also reproduce inequities. Young (2016) encourages teachers to include all aspects of student identity and experiences with having discussions with students in order to paint a more complete picture of their needs. Teachers cannot focus on just one aspect of a student's identity, much less ignore, erase, or completely throw out other parts.

Similarly, Ferri and Connor (2014) talk about how race, class, and dis/ability are commonly oversimplified and pushed to the margins of discussions in classrooms and in schools. For students who are already marginalized, aspects of social, economic, and dis/ability function in schools can further complicate and exclude already marginalized students. Lugones (2006) says that the key is not resistance to oppression, but an understanding of our own multiplicity. Related to students in the margins, Lugones reminds educators to understand their positioning in relation to multiple margins and centers, not just the single margins and center. Additionally, working to support students at the margins must recognize the experiences and situations others are in, even if they are not understandable to us, since issues of race, dis/ability, and social class are complex, nuanced, oftentimes oversimplified and complicated. In addition, de Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert (2011) interviewed general education teachers and found that a majority of them had negative or undecided views about inclusion. The same teachers shared that they did not feel prepared and confident in their skills to teach students with dis/abilities.

This section reviewed teacher perspectives on race and dis/ability. Scholars found that many teachers had difficulty engaging in discussions about race and cultural differences and

those with deficit thinking as it relates to their students were also likely to acknowledge colorblindness. Furthermore, teachers unknowingly punishment African American students for misbehaviors, which can be decreased through development of the teachers' awareness and positive beliefs of their students. Lastly, many teachers unknowingly ignore race and dis/ability, which reinforces white privilege and erases of key parts of their students' identities. The next section of the literature review will look at various theories and pedagogies that can be helpful as educators aim to address inequities for dis/abled students in special education.

## Anti-Ableist and Anti-Racist Pedagogies

Special education as a field is highly traditional, focusing on categorization, labeling, disabling, and separating those who are dis/abled and those who are not. The previous sections described disproportionality from the lens of special education, special education's trajectory from when it began to where it is now, the role of school districts, and perspectives from teachers. This section aims to consider how and which theories can help address disproportionality in such a highly traditional field. I will look work at scholars in fields of Disability Studies (DS), anti-racism, and humanizing pedagogy as examples and guides of theories of transformation and action that can be utilized within the field of special education. The first subsection will include studies that use Disability Studies Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) as a humanizing lens and the second subsection will include examples of anti-racist humanizing pedagogies.

### *DisCrit as a Humanizing Lens*

Using Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory (DisCrit), scholars and researchers have been able to look at the interlocking oppressions of racism and ableism, create new knowledge on the boundaries of intersectionality and expose the societal processes that contribute to ways that racism and ableism are interdependent. Scholars have critiqued, extended,

and applied DisCrit in order to center the voices of traditionally marginalized participants, uncovering counternarratives or forms of agency, enacting more inclusive and participatory research, and positioning individuals as knowledge creators. Furthermore, as demonstrated by the wealth of research, students of color and dis/abled students are oftentimes viewed through a in relation to their white non-dis/abled peers. Racism and ableism work in tandem to create student identities, student self-perceptions, and standardizes behaviors in school settings. This section begins with foundational description of ways that smartness and goodness qualities are ascribed to students then reviews literature that utilize DisCrit as a form of analysis as well as a humanizing pedagogy.

To frame how identities for students of color and dis/abled students are viewed in relation to their non-dis/abled peers, Leonardo and Broderick (2011) describe smartness and goodness as ideas that were strategically constructed by those in power and perpetuate in school systems. Although different forms of intelligences are acknowledged, there are still certain qualities and traits that are deemed more academically valuable such as critical thinking, leadership, teamwork, IQ, reading, writing, and math abilities. Students who can excel at the academic standards, meet the expectations of the teachers and schools, are labeled - either formally or informally- as smart and given the privileges that the label comes with. Smartness, like whiteness, is a form of property since those who are given and labeled it can reap the benefits of that label. Leonardo and Broderick (2011) say that discussing smartness as solely as a social construct is not enough and that educators must critique the ideology of smartness itself. Smartness as an ideology is problematic because it represents the power structures in our school systems, which ultimately value certain types of thinking and acting.

Broderick and Leonardo (2016) build off of their previous article about smartness as property and extend that into the idea of goodness. Goodness is another form of classification, which adults place on children in order to regulate, police, and control. Within the article by Broderick and Leonardo (2016), Alicia Broderick beautifully reflected on her mother-son moments, showing that young children are able to understand complex social situations, sometimes as well or even better than adults. Broderick's child was able to understand that kids of different racial identities have different expectations and consequences placed on them in schools. Broderick and Leonardo (2016) says that goodness is an ideology connected with whiteness and is a set of rules and regulations that are set up such as star charts, behavioral expectations, and awards of behaviors. These types of systems norm the behaviors and center how good or bad citizens are. In order to be smart, you must first be good. Also, you cannot be good unless you act, talk, and are the way your teachers want you to be. In this framework, goodness is then innate and not teachable. It is not a set of behaviors but a way in which educators regulate bodies.

According to Collins (2013) goodness profiling is viewing a person through the lens of deficiency. Furthermore, goodness profiling is a form of disablement and is not necessarily about the actions that make up a person's goodness. It is about one's relationship to authority, power, and cultural capital in the classroom. Goodness interacts with racism and ableism to center white, good, smart, and able-bodied as the norm. By creating and regulating bodies to be good, adults can control how students sit, speak, talk, and interact. Those who participate in this are rewarded with labels of smart and good, and those who deviate are seen as not so good and punished accordingly. As a prerequisite to smartness, while some are taught that their thinking and actions

are contributions to the classrooms, others are given explicit and implicit messages that their intelligence is inferior and that they lack the tools to be awarded the label of smart.

Next, to ground how overrepresentation is described and applied to DisCrit, Connor, Cavendish, Gonzalez, and Jean-Pierre (2019) critique how overrepresentation can be used in researched. The authors both problematize the ideology as it is currently framed and how it is considered in the field of special education. Firstly, by acknowledging the historic legacy of racism and ableism in the United States, uncomfortable conversations about privilege and whiteness can occur. Although students of color and dis/abled students are discussed and researched, less discussed, if at all, are considerations for whiteness in special education. The non-acknowledgement of whiteness or discussions about race allows for structures to exist and continue. Furthermore, Connor et al. (2019) state that the issues of overrepresentation may be irresolvable and question the idea of the problem itself. They urge educators to rethink the entire ideology of overrepresentation and research related to this phenomenon. Connor et al. (2019) said:

> [T]he 'problem' of overrepresentation is epistemological. Overrepresentation is primarily a philosophical concern encompassing the nature, scope, and origin of knowledge, together with methods that obtain specific knowledge, along with knowledge limitations that specific methods inevitably bring. Our contention is that researching over-representation cannot be solely restricted to positivist claims of empirical evidence as – like all research – the conceptualization of the problem, questions asked, theoretical frames and dispositions of researchers, data collected and analyzed, results discussed, and conclusions drawn are all unavoidably subject to human bias within forms of interpretation at every step in the process. (pp. 7-8)

The following two studies focus on issues facing the Latinx community, the first in higher education and the second in K-12 schools. First, Schwitzman (2019) includes DisCrit in their analysis of teacher education curriculum at a minority serving institution. The author incorporated dis/ability into a university course they taught at a racially diverse Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). This is an important study as it builds off the current body of research, which focuses mostly on how Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) work on helping white students understand diversity. Even at an HSI, students who have been historically marginalized also have varied understanding of diversity and differences. Students who have experienced being othered or lived in the margins do not automatically understand all marginalized experiences. Just as Schwitzman's (2019) students at the HSI were unable to essentialize all racial minority experiences by understanding racial inequality, the author says that teachers cannot understand the experiences of all dis/abled individuals without first understanding ableism. The author argues that centering Disability Studies in diversity education can support intersectionality in understanding differences, break down the essentialization of students of color, and better support teachers in understanding and preparing for teaching diverse populations.

In K-12 schools, Dávila (2015) looked at the experiences of Latinx students in special education, dis/ability microaggressions, and their response and resistance against them. Using a Disability Studies (DS) and DisCrit framework, the researchers completed classroom observations and interviews with students over the course of two semesters. Dávila (2015) defines dis/ability microaggressions as:

> Subtle verbal insults directed at students with disabilities, further characterized as automatic or unconscious layered insults based on one's dis/ability, race, gender, class,

> sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent or surname. They are cumulative and cause unnecessary stress to students with disabilities. (p. 453)

Types of dis/ability microaggressions that emerged in the study were: low expectations, disregard and bullying. Interestingly, students responded to these dis/ability microaggression by refusing special education services and accommodations and on the rare occasion, openly challenging the teacher's use of dis/ability microaggression.

Moving into studies that use DisCrit as a theoretical framework, the next two articles focus on Asian American minority teachers as well as pre-service teacher perceptions. Ramanathan (2006), a qualitative descriptive research study was conducted with the purpose of: 1) understanding issues that Asian American may have as minority teachers, 2) examining impacts they have on curricula and academic experiences, and 3) identifying support systems available. The author's overall argument is for schools to tap into Asian American teachers as resources for their students and communities since conversations about race in the U.S. cannot continue to be a dichotomous black-white discussion, but need to include other people of color groups. Ramanathan (2006) argues for the necessity for a study like this due to the silencing of Asian American teachers and questions if ethnicity is assimilated or absorbed in the school systems. In addition, Tuan (1998) says that the nullification of Asian roots as Asian Americans straddle a fine line between honorary whites and forever foreigners. The research study's methodology involved a survey of 23 questions given to Asian American teachers in a midwestern state. Questions on the survey dealt with issues of identity, effects of their ethnicity on the curriculum, support in their workplace, and awareness of and membership in professional ethnic support groups. Of the 106 total teachers invited to participate, forty responded but eventually only 34 surveys were deemed usable. The data was coded and categorized by the

researcher using open coding techniques. One the qualifications for this study were since the sampling frame was small, the survey was piloted with African-American teachers to test for a minority perspective first. Common themes that emerged from the findings include: the presence of Asian American teachers have little effect on the curriculum or core content courses, Asian American teachers have very little influence on the structures or working environment, Asian American teachers had an easier time connecting with their students of color, they were mostly unaware of support organizations and some teachers were perceived as racially neutral or colorless, since they were not black or white, and used that to their advantage for facilitating difficult conversations about race between students.

Banks (2015) applied DisCrit to look at pre-service teachers' perceptions of dis/ability, race, and gender, specifically with African American men in wheelchairs. The study showed that teachers' understanding of dis/ability was often influenced by their own experiences or exposure to media (e.g., urban gang violence) which caused them to perceive African American males with dis/abilities as victims of gun violence. In this qualitative study, 15 teachers read a narrative description of one student and discussed their thoughts in a focus group. The discussions aimed to investigate able-bodied, urban students' perceptions of individuals with dis/abilities, awareness of the causes of dis/abilities, and experiences and interactions with students with physical dis/abilities. Common themes that arose were that physical dis/abilities were a result of urban violence, dis/ability as a reason for pity and punishment, various stereotypes related to context, gender, and clothing, and self-examination of the definition of normalcy. Although many teachers understood dis/ability as a normal part of human development, many still considered physical dis/abilities in African American males as a result of gun violence; teachers who had not lived in urban communities were less likely to have the same opinion. Pity was

another common feeling, teachers feeling empathy for community members like this. Many teachers saw clothing and outward appearance as an indicator of gang affiliation. Lastly, teachers explored social constructions of what it means to be *normal* independently during their discussions but had trouble critiquing their own statements about students with dis/abilities. Another takeaway was that those educators with more knowledge about human development or that had previous interactions with dis/abled individuals were more likely to separate dis/ability from race. This is interesting because it speaks to how much outer appearances affects a teacher's construction of a student's identity by their race. The race of the student, if black, would have teachers think about gang affiliation and gun violence, instead of what they know about physical dis/abilities.

The next three articles focus on issues relating to DisCrit and applied to teacher education and critical pedagogy. In Annamma et al. (2013), critiques of the binary of normal/abnormal was applied to US schools using a DisCrit lens. The authors discuss the historical reasons that led up to the concepts of normalcy in schools, deconstructed the current, westernized, static ideology of normal, and provided insight on reconstruction the ideology of normal in schooling. The authors say that normalcy in US school was constructed to compare everyone to the typical white student. Ableism and racism as typically unaddressed and unchallenged notions which aimed to perpetuate the hierarchical relationships of power and students. Educational systems have a way pretending to be neutral even though conceptions of ability and the norm are biased. RTI in education does not include practices that are culturally or historically centered, instead it focuses on inadequate instruction and classroom environments. RTI privileges instructional context but locates the deficit within the child. Students of color are over-represented in all disciplinary actions as well as referred for special education. Schools position students of color, second

language learners and those with diverse cultural backgrounds as dis/abled or abnormal. This allows educators to be overly attentive to students who are not normal or adequately development. The authors argue that diversity must be valued and that the interpersonal and institutional must inform one another.

Next, Lalvani, Broderick, Fine, Jacobowitz, and Michelli (2015) discussed the place of dis/ability in the multicultural education framework and the role of inclusion in education in a democracy. Since special education classes exist, there is the implicit ideology of the separate but equal, which go against inclusive and democratic ideologies. In general, the authors say that teacher education programs focus on differentiated instruction rather than fostering their commitment to teaching inclusively. Many teacher beliefs about dis/ability are connected to the medical model parading of dis/ability, focusing on deficits of an individual rather than the lived realities within the socio-political biased systems. There may also be a dysconsciousness in teacher education about dis/abilities. Lalvani et al. (2015) describe dysconsciousness as: "[people's] limited and distorted understandings about the nature of inequality; distortions that make it difficult for them to act in favor of truly equitable education" (p. 171). The author argues that multicultural education must intentionally confront all forms of inequity and consider our own ableist privilege. In order to develop a critical consciousness, authors propose that we must make visible the "wallpaper of our daily lives" (p. 174) referring to the exclusionary practices/structures that are both invisible and resilient over time. To address these issues, authors suggest having pre-service/professional discussions on inclusion and study groups for critical conversations.

Finally, Liasidou (2014) discusses educational inclusion, emancipatory potential of schools and western-centric and neoliberal constructions of the ideal student and pedagogy. The

author challenges segregated placements in special education and how critical pedagogy can support inclusive education. Barton (2003) describes a radical human rights approach to inclusive education as a focus to address unequal ways powers are distributed, the discriminatory practices against dis/ability, and contributions to additional social and political reforms towards a socially just world. Liasidou (2014) says that individuals with dis/abilities experience intersectional subordination which denotes multiple forms of discriminations based on identity. Since special education focuses the deficits of the individual, interventions and specialized instruction to address those barriers and processes of assessments and identification. Critical pedagogy's focus on power, justice, and social transformation can be used when thinking about students in subordinate positions. Using liberatory thought and pedagogy can help fight the deficit model and otherness image cast on students with dis/abilities.

Now I will highlight work by Annamma (2014 & 2017) that focuses on highlighting voices of girls/women of color who were incarcerated and the impacts their labels and schools had on their experiences. First, Annamma (2014) completed a qualitative study young woman labeled with Emotional Disabilities (ED) in the school to prison pipeline. Using a CRT, Feminist Critical Race Theory (FemCrit) and DisCrit intersectional analysis, the researcher interviewed and observed ten student participants, currently or previously labeled as ED, and was currently residing in juvenile justice department facilities. Two main themes emerged from her findings: experiences with dis/ability labels in the school-to-prison pipeline and socializing practices in juvenile incarceration. First, participants expressed feeling unintelligent while in K-12 schools. While some made good connections with their case manager or teachers, others felt special education was an exclusionary form of surveillance on them. Special education was a site of both support and confusion and rejection. Inside the juvenile correction facility, the participants felt

the socializing practices, such as following rules and orders, did not teach them real world skills. Instead, these socialization practices were manufactured to exert control over the youth. Young women of color with dis/abilities did not completely understand their dis/ability label, its purpose, and mutability in the school-to-prison pipeline. Once in the pipeline, participants felt like socializing practices were more focused on than academics.

Next, Annamma (2017) looks at the experiences of young women of color who experience dis/ability labels as well as placements in prisons, centering their voices and points of view. Within what Annamma calls the "prison nation", "pedagogies of pathologizations", including "hyper-surveillance, hyper-labeling, and hyper-punishment create students who did not fit unspoken yet desired normative standards" (p. 13). Annamma's experiences as an educator working with incarcerated youth shed light on criminalization, redemption and pedagogies of resistance. Annamma utilized interviews, educational journal mapping and observations to explore the experiences of the participants, mapping their journeys within schools, the construction of their identities within detention, their unprepared exits and various methods of resistance. Annamma's pedagogy of resistance was formed through what the participants had to say. Beginning with a mapping exercise she called cartographer's clinic, the girls shared their experiences and choices in schools visually. Many of the girls' experiences included examples of institutional absence, in that they had little to no access to healthcare, security, childcare, and was ignored in schools. They were often punished for prioritizing their families, labeled with dis/abilities, hyper-surveilled, and ultimately prepared for criminal literacy. Annamma (2017) says:

> In public schools, girls experienced creative destruction through systematic divestment of resources and investment in criminalizing difference that sent them careering into the

> legal system. Incarcerating girls was a different kind of investment, the creation of new infrastructure to support the prison nation that constructed the girls as criminals. This pedagogy of pathologizations, allowed the agents within these sites to position the girls as so different they needed redemption that could only come through incarceration. Criminal identities were animated through labeling the girls' thinking as "criminal" and the only way to cure it was through rhetoric of responsibility. (p. 62)

Using the rhetoric of responsibility, the girls were given all the responsibility over their lives while schools erased their social, political, and material responsibilities. After their incarceration, many of the girls continued to experience continued absences of societal care, as they were ejected from juvenile detention.

Annamma pulls from Miraftab and Willis' (2005) notion of invented spaces, something individuals create to meet their needs. In the case of these girls, invented spaces were created while they were incarcerated, due to their lack of freedom, they were able to create a sense of agency and independence. Employing these strategies of resistance was a way for them to reclaim their citizenship which is often destroyed in prison. Expanding on her pedagogy of resistance, Annamma calls for use to DisCrit curriculum pedagogy and solidarity. A DisCrit pedagogy builds on student's strengths and resistance, is committed to reframing students' notion of dis/ability, and in the classroom, teachers can teach comprehensive histories of communities of color, reflect on ways policies, practices, and intersections are perpetuated, and lastly disrupt interaction and systemic oppression. DisCrit solidarity rejects classifying a student by their behavior but is rooted in love that recognizes students' resistance as a natural part of existing. Dis/ability should be a welcome political identity, instead of something to be punished.

Finally, justice in the eyes of one of the participants Imani, was a kind of solidarity where her teachers treated her students as their own children, not just as a student.

In summary, this section looked at the ways DisCrit has been used in research to create new knowledge that centers on the experiences of traditionally marginalized participants. The studies focused the experiences of teachers of color, microaggressions experienced in K-12 as well as higher education, preservice teachers' perceptions, how DisCrit can be used a critical pedagogy, and voices of young women who were incarcerated. The next section will review examples of pedagogies that are anti-racist and humanizing.

### *Anti-Racist and Humanizing Pedagogies*

In this section, I will describe the various types of pedagogies, theories, and ideas put forward by critical thinkers who imagine education differently, in ways that are anti-racist and humanizing for our students. Since disproportionality in special education is a complex issue related to historic anti-blackness, ableism, and dehumanization for people of color, I wanted to look into theories of transformation and action that can inspire my thinking and look at strategies of addressing disproportionality that match the sophistication of the systemic violence and harm in special education. First, I will look at abolitionist teaching by Love (2019), which is the practice of working in solidarity with communities of color while drawing on their imagination, creativity, boldness, and subversiveness of abolitionist to eradicate injustice. Then I will review ways to promote high achievement among African American students by Perry, Stelle, and Hillard (2003). Lastly, I will discuss humanizing pedagogies from Freire (1970), del Carmen Salazar (2013), and Camangian (2015).

First, the book by Love (2019) interweaves personal stories with theory, quotes, and her thoughts on how abolitionist pedagogy and teaching can liberate students, specifically dark folx.

Her writing and theories center on race as well as intersectionality, history, and empowerment. She believes that educators must acknowledge students' humanity and push back on anti-racist teaching practices. Love (2019) says that education is important because it is a space for students to practice skills that they can utilize in the real world after school is over and in addition, she advocates for strong civics and communication education where can learn about more than academics. According to Love (2019), abolitionist teaching is both about breaking structures but also dreaming and joy and positivity. It is a way of life that starts with dreaming of a better future collectively. Love (2019) elaborates that abolitionist teaching:

> Is refusing to take part in the zero-tolerance policies and the school-to-prison pipeline. Demanding restorative justice in our schools as the only schoolwide or districtwide approach to improving school culture. Abolitionist teaching ensures that students feel safe in schools and that schools are not perpetrators of violence towards the very students they are supposed to protect. Abolitionist teaching is calling out your fellow teachers who degrade and diminish dark children and do not think dark children matter.... we have to call them out. Abolitionist teaching stands in solidarity with parents and fellow teachers opposing standardized testing, English-only education, racist teachers, arming teachers with guns, and turning schools into prisons. Abolitionist teaching asks educators to acknowledge and accept America and its policies as anti-Black, racist, discriminatory, and unjust and to be in solidary with dark folks and poor folks fighting for their humanity and fighting to move beyond surviving. (p. 12)

Love (2019) says that educators can use pedagogy as a tool to help students do more than survive. Teachers need to first understand the complex histories of discrimination and the role of education that suppress dark peoples. The “educational survival complex” (Love, 2019, p. 27) is

a tool to maintain the hate, prorogate white rage, and dark suffering, students are educated to survive but not change their living conditions. Teachers can use intersectionality to help students understand the complex discrimination and to where they fit into the picture and history. Love says that racism is the antecedent of failing schools, poverty, homelessness, police brutality, and crime, not education. Because of that, educators must call out injustices and understand how they affected our students and communities. Using pedagogies that highlight, teach, and critiques injustices such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and Islamophobia can work to undo these systems while creating new ones based on collective vision and knowledge of dark folx.

As it relates to character education, Love (2019) discusses how this has been used for a long time in order to suppress and police dark students. For example, many charters schools promote character education, which encourages students to learn traits like grit and work hard, while not acknowledging the existing structural barriers that prevent them from learning and from succeeding. In many of our schools, students are taught character education, instead of how to be critical thinking and civically engaged. Love (2019) says that our students need more than character education and need to be taught how to address whiteness and white supremacy. According to the Child Development Study (2017), students from working-class families who grow up believing the American meritocracy of hard work are more likely to engage in risky behavior and have lower self-esteem and lack skills needed to interpret the worlds social, economic and pollical systems.  Educators cannot tell children to work hard and succeed on their own. Love (2019) would consider that racist thinking since it does not acknowledge the historical complexities that have worked against them and their ancestors, laws in place that work against them succeeding. Educators need to protect and support our dark students' potential by knowing them, including their families, honoring their communities, seeing them past their

living experiences and trauma, and push them and support them. If we teach them about meritocracy, and they buy it, then they are more at risk for system justification, which leads them to believe that the status quo is fair, which will ultimately cause them to fail and blame it on themselves, instead of on the systemic oppressions that are in place to make them fail.

Love (2019) says that abolitionist teaching starts with freedom dreaming, dreams grounded in a critique of injustice. These dreams are not whimsical, unattainable daydreams, they are critical and imaginative dreams of collective resistance. In addition, teachers themselves need to be taught how to question whiteness, white supremacy, how to check their white emotions of guilt and anger, and after unpacking and interrogating whiteness, will they be able to stand in solidarity with their students' communities for social change. For Love personally, she had educators who were her protectors, that built relationships with her, her family, her community, who saw her beyond her trauma and were not only benevolent but also recognized the intersections of their relationships. Furthermore, Love (2019) says that abolitionist teaching is:

> [A]s much about tearing down old structures and ways of thinking as it is about forming new ideas. It is a way of life, a way of seeing the world, and a way of taking action against injustice. It seeks to resist, agitate, and tear down the educational survival complex through teachers who work in solidarity with their schools' community to achieve incremental changes in their classrooms and schools for students in the present day, while simultaneously freedom dreaming and vigorously creating a vision for what schools will be when the educational survival complex is destroyed. (p. 89)

Instead of just allies, Love (2019) says that we need coconspirators. Whereas allyship is working towards something that is mutually beneficial, allies do not have to love dark people, question

their privilege, decenter their voices, and build meaningful relationships, take risks or be in solidarity with others. Allies just need to show up, thus their allyship can be seen as performative, self-glorifying, and centers whiteness. According to Love (2019), teachers must come to the classroom having done the work prior in understanding and embracing theory, theories that provide the language and frameworks to understanding and fighting for intersectional social justice. Theories such as settler colonialism (Arvin, Tuck & Morrill, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wolfe, 1999; Patel, 2015), Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Bell, 1995; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995), black feminism (hooks, 1989; Collins, 2000), black queer theory (Johnson, 2008) and critical whiteness studies (Nayak, 2007) helps to guide the thinking, and provides history and knowledge to navigate issues that will come up.

Next, Perry et al. (2003) write three connected essays about achievement for African American students in a society that has often devalued their abilities and potential. The authors pose different strategies and ideas for how educators can do such. In the first essay, Perry et al. (2003) promotes literacy as a tool towards liberation for African American students. Historically, although the relationship between effort and reward for African Americans in schools was not clear, educator and learning were a way to assert yourself as a free person, work toward racial equality and the liberation of your community and peoples. Literacy laws in American were in place to keep people from voting and participating in society. African Americans were limited in what they could learn and what types of schooling was available to them. Using narratives, Perry et al. (2003) illustrates the power of literacy and how education through literacy and how literacy can be used as a tool for empowerment towards freedom. Many students of color struggle in schools because of the culturally and socially differences. What students bring into schools such as their language, attitudes, and communication styles, are only seen as problematic when their

educators' knowledge baes and attitudes see those as deficient. For those reasons, Perry et al. (2003) promotes education through culturally relevant ways. By reducing cultural dissonance and including familiar community styles, students of color be better included in the school community and have their identities affirmed. Furthermore, Perry et al. (2003) says that schools need to set a culture of achievement for all students that include their African American students. Their belief that they can succeed and of the importance of school can be positively promoted by teachers by explicitly convey their belief and with high academic standards.

Through various empirical psychological experiments, Perry et al. (2003) discusses how stereotype threat heavily affects African American students when they believe they are being judged as members of their racial group rather than as individuals. Perry et al. (2003) says that success for African American students seem to depend less on expectations and motivation than on trust that stereotypes of their group have no limits on their success. Black student performance in these studies increased when they were told explicitly that the tests were racially fair. To negate these stereotype threats, identity safety can be achieved, according to Markus, Stelle, and Stelle (2000) by including these strategies: 1) pedagogy and relationships between individual teachers and students, 2) institutional and contextual changes, and 3) individual personal response.

Freire (1970) and del Carmen Salazar (2013) describe how the society uses education in dehumanizing ways. This is done by use of the banking model, hidden messages and curriculum embedded in the standardized curriculum, and ignoring our students of colors' experiences, background and knowledge that they bring into the classroom. del Carmen Salazar (2013) says humanizing pedagogy rejects the dominant culture of whiteness, helps students develop critical consciousness. This is also referred to by Freire (1970) as conscientização. We can support the

development of their critical consciousness by the realities of their lives, creating safe spaces in the classroom, challenges them to think of the complex problems of their lives and in the world, supports their change from an object to subject and ultimately recreates teaching and learning as a tool of radical reconstruction.

Humanizing pedagogy developed by many scholars as a response to Freire's (1970) call to reinvent humanizing pedagogy in their own contexts, includes the full development of a person through humanization, critical reflection and describes humanization is an individual and collective journey. Teachers are taught strategies like how to deliver lessons that meet grade-level and state-wide standards and which language objectives and sentence frames can be utilized to support English-language learners or students with dis/abilities. In credentialing programs, best practices are encouraged but the full development of a student, reciprocal sharing between student teacher, and situating the lessons upon social issues affecting student lives are rarely if ever mentioned. The inclusion of the education of our children's psychological and socio-emotional well-beings are deemed extra and outside any specific areas of content, so they are typically not emphasized. By emphasizing the development of the whole student and through caring, del Carmen Salazar (2013) says teachers can bring a sense of humanizing by reciprocal sharing of perspectives on life to help students feel more supported and more interested in school, gain a sense of identity validation, and feel a closer inter-personal relationship with another human being who just happens to be their teacher. Caring is something that has to come from an individual or individuals who are in the classroom to support student's humanization process.

Another tenant in humanizing pedagogy describes it as both an individual and collective journey. Freire (1970) encourages individuals to engage in self-consciousness through reflective journaling. Through this process, del Carmen Salazar (2013) says an individual can see

themselves as a racialized human being and begin to challenge themselves and the system of education in the continuation and perpetuation of oppression. As for collectively engaging in group consciousness, dialogue is encouraged in order to folx to discuss, reflect and ponder the oppressive forces, how to create interruptions and resistances to those conditions. Dialogue can also be used as a pedagogical strategy to pose problems for students about the oppressive conditions in society, to create conversations in the classroom, and to engage students in dialogue that is truly transformational and leads to change. Using reflection, students and teachers can become more human through their ability to think about systemic inequalities and act afterwards to challenging the dominant narratives. These self-critical reflections further allow educations to ensure that their teaching practices are validating student identities, encouraging students to bring in their home cultures/languages, that they are making those personal connections and showing their students how they care, and ultimately reaffirming their belief in humanity (del Carmen Salazar, 2013; Jiménez, 2020).

Similarly, Camangian (2013) offered critical participatory teacher analysis and suggested implementing a humanizing pedagogy in classrooms by agitating our students politically, arousing their critical curiosity, and inspiring self and social transformation. His framework drew from culturally relevant, critical pedagogical, and critical literacy theories. Camangian (2013) argues youth of color are oftentimes disengaged in schools which can be rooted in the dissonance between their lived experiences and content they learn in the classroom. Humanizing pedagogy can teach students to love themselves and heal from their suffering. Humanizing pedagogy is transformational because it can center their lived experiences while helping them understand systems of oppression. When teachers create learning opportunities that respond to our students'

struggles, it allows them space to articulate their experiences and awaken their critical consciousness.

This section of the literature review looked at pedagogies, strategies, and ideas put forth by scholars that are anti-racist and humanizing in classroom and community spaces. Love (2019) discussed abolitionist teaching, Perry, Stelle, and Hilliard (2003) talked about the potential and in African American students. Freire (1970) and del Carmen Salazar (2013) suggests strategies for teaching in humanizing ways. Camangian suggested implementing a humanizing pedagogy in classrooms by agitating our students politically, arousing their critical curiosity, and inspiring self and social transformation. Next, I will summarize this literature review and review what will be discussed in the next chapter.

**Summary**

This literature review outlined key findings regarding the historical and current status of research on overrepresentation of students of color in special education. By in large, this body of research has focused on factors that contribute to the problem, the ways ideas such as dis/ability and inclusion have evolved over time, and perceptions on dis/abled students by adults. Together, these works illustrate the gap in scholarly knowledge as it relates to narratives and the experiences of teachers and parents of dis/abled students. The present study aims to address this gap by collecting narrative data from classroom teachers, central office staff, and parents who have firsthand knowledge of ways they are addressing issues of overrepresentation both individually as collectively. Furthermore, little is known on ways district staff can better support classroom teachers to interrupt and combat disproportionality. This study aims to fill in these gaps in order to better understand the issue of disproportionality of students of color who are placed in segregated settings.

# Chapter III: Methodology

As stated in Chapter I, the purpose of this study is to highlight the kinds of experiences students and their family's experience in special education related to humanization and violence. By including the voices of teachers and district staff, the goal of this dissertation is to uncover examples of the kinds of pathologization, invisibilization, and humanization of our students and their parents. In addition to gaining a better understanding of how special education district staff are working to both reproduce and disrupt the violent exclusion of students of color in special education, this study will include the voices and experiences of parent community members who understand the experiences of dis/abled youth personally. This chapter describes the methodology I utilized to collect data in answering my research questions. I will also provide an overview of the school sites and participants, address the limitations that might arise when using these methods, and describe how I will analyze the data once it is collected. I will end this chapter by including my background and positionality as a researcher and educator.

## Research Design

This research study will be guided by qualitative methods for multiple reasons. The first reason is to fill a gap in special education research. In their synthesis article on disproportionality trends, Cooc and Kiru (2018) found that 79% of studies on disproportionality between 1990 and 2018 used quantitative methods. Secondly, while I value statistics and numbers as an educator, as a researcher, I gravitate more towards humanistic qualitative methods, which aims to document the world from the point of view of individuals in order to process, make meaning and come to an understanding (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research builds on ideas, concepts, and hypotheses from individuals and aims to produce explicit, comprehensive, and trustworthy scholarly work. Below list the research questions that guide the present study.

## Research Questions

As stated in Chapter I, the following research questions guided the inquiry of this study:

1. What are the humanizing and pathological qualities of special education in urban school districts?
2. What kinds of violence do dis/abled students and their families experience within special education?
3. How do parents/family members of students labeled with dis/abilities respond to mistreatment by the school district and engage in advocacy and activism?

Below I will include a description of the school district demographics, introduce the two elementary schools and study participants.

## Research Setting

The setting for my research will be in a large urban public-school district in California. The school district has over 55,000 students, approximately 9,000 of which receive special education services (~11%). The diverse school district demographic breakdown includes: 35% Asian American[6], 27% Latinx 15% white, 7% African American, 5% Filipino, 1% Pacific Island, 5% multi-racial, as well as 55% socioeconomically disadvantaged, 29% English language learners, and 11% of students receiving special education services. Within this school district, there are 140 individual school sites. Of the eleven participants, the four teachers interviewed (Ella, Dolores, Shirley, and Amalia) are associated with the two public elementary schools (Lower Haight and Bayview schools). Their experiences highlight the work of those two elementary schools exclusively. The parents/family members I interviewed are associated with

[6] Due to the diversity and high percentage of students in the district identifying as Asian Pacific Islander (API), specific student ethnicities are typically included in district information in order to represent the student populations more accurately.

other public schools within the district and non-public schools that the district contracts with. The four content specialists all work within the special education district office.

### *Lower Haight and Bayview Elementary Schools*

In general, elementary schools in this school district have between 150 to 600 students. While the school district is diverse overall, enrollment practices via a lottery system have fueled racial segregation among schools, meaning many elementary schools are racially similar. Of the 70 elementary schools in the district, 14 of them are racially segregated, meaning 60% of the students are of one racial/ethnic group (Goldstein, 2019). Due to the district lottery enrollment process, affluent and educated parents compete for the small number of seats at the highest-performing schools. Children from working-class families- mainly African American and Latinx- often attend schools in their communities that are typically lower academically performing.

The two elementary schools that I focused on were Bayview elementary school[7] and Lower Haight elementary school. First, Bayview elementary school has a rich history of community involvement and being known as a neighborhood school. Since enrollment is low at 151 total students, many teachers and families I spoke to described it as a small and loving community. Class sizes are small, between 10-15 students per class, and many parents and grandparents also went to the same elementary school. Teachers reported that due to high housing costs and issues of homelessness in this city, many families live together in one household and their children all attended Bayview elementary. Teachers say their principal leads by example and most of the staff and faculty have deep connections to the students, family, and community. In 2012, Bayview elementary received the school improvement grant, which meant

[7] Bayview and Lower Haight elementary schools are pseudonyms.

the school was among the lowest performing 5% in the state and received $45 million to raise student achievement. Teacher participants from Bayview elementary spoke positively about this grant, which included additions of new staff and programs to support the school community. Demographically, Bayview elementary is 43% African American, 13.9% Latinx, 15.9% Pacific Islander, 7.3% English learner, 14.6% receive special education services, and 82.1% classified from low income households.

Next, the faculty at Lower Haight elementary describes their school as a small, loving community school with dedicated staff. The school functions also a community hub, with many Community Based Organizations (CBOs) on-site and communal facilities that families can utilize, such as counseling, a community kitchen and a laundry room. Many of the faculty have worked at this school for 10+ years and are said to be dedicated to this school community. The school administrator and both the academic coaches were previously teachers before taking on a leadership role. Faculty are provided many professional development leadership opportunities during the summers, such as attending conferences for lesson study abroad in Japan. Teachers are also encouraged to become teacher leaders through the Teacher Leadership Fellowship (TLF), a program that provides one-to-one coaching for four years to develop them into teacher leader. The school has 225 students enrolled, demographically broken down as 18.2% African American, 51.6% Latinx, 36.9% English learners, 12.9% receive special education services, and 81.3% are from low income households. Below I will describe how I chose the participants for the present study.

***Participants***

Participants in this study are teachers, parents/family of dis/abled students and special education district staff. I planned to include twelve adult participants but ultimately completed

eleven interviews since I was unable to find a fourth parent to include. To include perspectives from the community, I interviewed three family members, guardians, or member of community organizations who have close ties and experiences with dis/abled youth who attend schools within the school district. One of the teachers I interviewed, Ella, also shared her perspective as a family member of a dis/abled student, so I included data from her interview as both a staff and family member. In terms of district staff, I interviewed four teachers from two schools (two general education and two special education), four special education content specialists, and I include myself as a participant.

**Table 1. List of Participants**

| Participant | Role | Race and Ethnicity | Site & Setting of Special Education Services |
|---|---|---|---|
| Grace | Parent | Chinese American | • Daughter is in the 11th grade. She attended public schools (elementary, middle, and high) in the district before transferring to a mental health focus non-public school during 10th grade |
| Angela | Parent | White | • Son is in the 11th grade. He attended a public K-8 charter school in the school district before transferring to a non-public school in the 9th grade |
| Ms. Brown | Parent | White | • Son is an 11th grader in a public school in the district. He also attended public elementary and middle schools in the school district<br>• Ms. Brown is also employed by the school district within the special education department |
| Ella | Special Ed. Teacher and Family Member | African American | • Teaches at Bayview ES (public school)<br>• Nephew attended a public high school in the district before transferring to a residential non-public school |
| Dolores | General Ed. Teacher | Latina Latinx | • Teaches at Bayview ES (public school) |
| Shirley | General Ed. Teacher | African American | • Teaches at Lower Haight ES (public school) |
| Amalia | Special Ed. Teacher | Latina Latinx | • Teaches at Lower Haight ES (public school) |
| Ramona | Content Specialist | Multiethnic Latina | • District office |
| Ruth | Content | White | • District office |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Bristow | Specialist | | |
| Alexandria | Content Specialist | Japanese American | • District office |
| Michelle | Content Specialist | White | • District office |
| Andy (self) | Content Specialist | Asian American | • District office |

Relating to the choosing participants, the voices and perspectives of parents whose children and youth are the ones being impacted by this was important to include. Community members are defined as parents, family members of students who receive special education services. I interviewed three community members and one teacher who is also a community member. For this study, criteria for parent/community participants was that they met one of the criteria below:

1. Family, parent, or guardian of youth receiving special education services. Ideally with experience in being referred for a more restrictive setting.
2. Adult working in a community organization focused on serving dis/abled students, such as the Community Advisory Council (CAC) for Special Education, the African American Parent Advisory Council (AAPAC), or the Parent Advisory Council (PAC).

To answer the research question about the humanizing and pathological qualities of special education in an urban school district, I interviewed four special education content specialists and four teachers. In order to identify district staff participants who were likely to have knowledge and experiences on this topic, I employed criterion sampling approach. For this study, criteria for district staff participants was that they met one of the criteria below:

1. Participant must be currently employed in the school district as a special education teacher, general education teacher or special education content specialist.
2. Participant must be employed at the special education central office or one of the two

chosen elementary schools.

## Participant Profiles

In this section, I will introduce each of my participants, their experiences in education, and include some general information about their background and how they are connected to special education and this school district.

### *Overview of Parent and Community Members*

To include the perspective of parents and community members, I interviewed three parents of dis/abled students. All three are actively involved in their child's education. In addition, Angela and Ms. Brown are both also actively involved in the parent advisory group for dis/abled students in the school district. I include Ella in this section, who I originally chose to interview as a special education teacher. During our interview, Ella shared her nephew's experiences as a student in the school district, which related to this research area.

**Table 2. Parent and Community Member Participants**

| Participant | Role | Race and Ethnicity | Site & Setting of Special Education Services |
|---|---|---|---|
| Grace | Parent | Chinese American | • Daughter is in the 11th grade. She attended public schools (elementary, middle, and high) in the district before transferring to a mental health focus non-public school during 10th grade |
| Angela | Parent | White | • Son is in the 11th grade. He attended a public K-8 charter school in the school district before transferring to a non-public school in the 9th grade |
| Ms. Brown | Parent | White | • Son is an 11th grader in a public school in the district. He also attended public elementary and middle schools in the school district<br>• Ms. Brown is also employed by the school district within the special education department |
| Ella | Special Ed. Teacher and Family Member | African American | • Teaches at Bayview ES (public school)<br>• Nephew attended a public high school in the district before transferring to a residential non-public school |

Grace is a Chinese-American single-parent and her daughter is currently a 10th grader attending a non-public school funded by the district. Her school is a counseling-enriched program for students with emotional needs, located in a hospital facility. Her daughter struggled in both her small and large public middle schools, even after qualifying for an IEP. Due to her anxiety and school avoidance, Grace enrolled her at an alternative public high school that focused on independent learning. Her daughter continued to struggle in the independent learning program and one quarter into 9th grade, transitioned into a counselor-enriched Special Day Class (SDC) located at the same school. Grace said the teacher and staff in the counseling-enriched Special Day Class (SDC) were very understanding but she did not make improvements with attendance and was still refusing mental health services. Due to that, I was the content specialist who offered her daughter placement at a mental-health focused non-public school. Grace admits that she has become more accepting of her daughters mental-health needs recently. Grace also expressed frustration with the non-public school's one-size-fits-all approach, which is not individualized for her daughter. In terms of my relationship with Grace, I knew Grace since I was the content specialist at her daughter's alternative high school. When her daughter was struggling, I was invited to the IEP meeting to consult on programs that could better fit her needs. I participated in multiple meetings with Grace and her daughter's IEP team and ultimately supported her daughter in moving into the non-public school.

Angela described herself as an active parent. She had always been involved at her son's school parent teacher association (PTA) and has participated in the district's parent advisory committee for two years Her son is currently a 10th grader and attends a non-public school funded by the district. His school specializes in teaching students with asperser's, nonverbal learning dis/abilities and other neurocognitive dis/abilities. Prior to attending this non-public

school, he attended a public charter K-8 school. Angela says her son is highly intelligent but started struggling socially and academically in 5th grade, which is when she started requesting student support team (SST) meetings to discuss interventions with teachers. Angela said that she felt like staff were being deceptive during the assessment process. Even as a white college-educated, fluent English-speaking parent, she said the process of getting him an IEP was unnecessarily difficult. Angela described her family as not a wealthy family but with the help of her network of involved parents, free advocacy services, private assessments, and her active involvement, she was able to get her son placed the non-public school. Now, with the proper services and in an appropriate setting, her son has a 3.8 GPA and is preparing for college-entrance. Lastly, she said that for her son, someone with a high IQ, the general education classroom is the most restrictive placement for them. In terms of my relationship to Angela, I did not know her prior to interviewing her. She as recommended to me by Ms. Brown.

Ms. Brown has a 17-year old son who attends a public high school in the district. In addition to being an engaged parent, Ms. Brown participates in her son's school Parent Teacher Association (PTA), the district advisory council and is employed by the school district. Ms. Brown has always been an involved parent ever since her son qualified for special education services in elementary school. Ms. Brown described battling with the district for many years to get proper services for her son, such as having bringing in advocates and attorneys. After attending a public elementary school, the district offered her son a placement at a non-public school in 6th grade. Due to the distance away from home as well as his acceptance into a public middle school with an impressive special education program, they opted to have him attend the latter school. Her son is now on-track to applying to four-year universities. Ms. Brown is a big advocate for access in academics and in the arts. She also has taken it upon herself to discuss

with her son what his dis/ability means in society. I knew Ms. Brown since we both work in the special education department. I was aware that Ms. Brown is an involved parent and knew I would be interested in talking to her more about her experiences as a parent of a dis/abled child.

I include Ella as both a community member and special education teacher because halfway through our interview, she shared that nephew was a student labeled with a dis/ability in our district. Ella her nephew's struggles in school ultimately led to him being placed at a residential facility. She described how his experience impacted her entire family and her perspectives on how the special education department can better support dis/abled students and their families if the goal is to prevent them from going to more restrictive placements. Ella and I had worked together prior to our interview. I facilitated monthly teacher workshops that Ella would attend. Although I did not know Ella well, I knew I wanted to interview her since she is one of the few African American special educators in the district. Below I will introduce teachers who I interviewed.

### *Overview of Teachers*

In total, I interviewed four teachers, two with special education credentials and two with multiple subjects' credentials. At Lower Haight elementary school, Amalia is the resource specialist and Shirley teaches 5$^{th}$ grade. At Bayview elementary school, Ella is the resource specialist and Dolores teaches kindergarten.

**Table 3. Teacher Participants**

| Participant | Role | Race and Ethnicity | Site & Setting of Special Education Services | Years in Edu |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ella | Special Ed. Teacher and Family Member | African American | • Teaches at Bayview ES (public school)<br>• Nephew attended a public high school in the district before transferring to a residential non-public school | 11 |
| Dolores | General Ed. Teacher | Latina Latinx | • Teaches at Bayview ES (public school) | 5 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Shirley | General Ed. Teacher | African American | • Teaches at Lower Haight ES (public school) | 5 |
| Amalia | Special Ed. Teacher | Latina Latinx | • Teaches at Lower Haight ES (public school) | 26 |

Ella's interview includes her perspectives as a special education teacher as well as the perspective of a dis/abled student's family member. As related to her being an educator, Ella became a teacher in 1994. Prior to becoming a teacher, she worked in insurance and ran a daycare facility, so she was familiar with people with dis/abilities. She says that there was a push in the mid-1990s to recruit more African American teachers, so her credentialing program was fully funded at SF State University. In her fifteen years a special education teacher, she has worked at Bayview elementary and five other elementary and K-8 schools with this district.

Dolores has taught at Bayview elementary for two years and prior to that, she taught in LAUSD for three years. She describes wanting to teach in historically underserved school and has always worked in schools with working-class families. In LA, she worked with primarily Latinx students and now at Bayview elementary she works mostly with African-American students and families. Although she has little experience with special education, she has taught students with different supports needs and continues to advocate for getting them additional support services. Both Shirley and Dolores were recommended to me by either Amalia or Ella. At the end of my interviews with Amalia and Ella, I asked them to recommend general education teachers at their school sites who would perhaps want to talk to me. I met Shirley and Dolores the first time when I interviewed them.

Shirley completed her student teaching and has taught at Lower Haight elementary for five years. Before becoming a teacher, she worked with AmeriCorps. She has taken advantage of all the professional development and teacher leadership opportunities available at her school-site, becoming a teacher leader and has attended summer conferences and institutes to continue her

learning. She likes her school because it feels like a neighborhood school and the staff are dedicated to the students.

Amalia previously taught public school in Los Angeles for five years and has taught at Lower Haight elementary for six years. In addition to working with students with mild to moderate support needs, she has also worked with autistic students at a non-public school setting. In Los Angeles, she described not feeling connected to the students and community since it was an upper middle class setting. Since she grew up in a diverse community, when she moved to the Bay area, she wanted to continue working with a diverse student population which is why she came to work at Lower Haight elementary. She described herself as an optimist, wanting to provide students with all the interventions available to keep them in the general education setting. Although I did not know Amalia prior to interviewing her, she was recommended to me by Alexandria, who is her content specialist. Knowing both of us, Alexandria thought we would connect well based on our philosophies on special education and issues facing students of color. Instantly after starting our interview, I could hear that we had similar ideas and frustrations. Next, I will introduce the four content specialists I interviewed for the present study.

### *Overview of Content Specialists*

The four special education content specialists I interviewed are colleagues and friends of mine. They have worked in the special education district office as content specialists for three years (Alexandria), five years (Ramona and Ruth), and fifteen years (Michelle). All four were also previously special education teachers before becoming content specialists.

**Table 4. Content Specialist Participants**

| Participant | Role | Race/Ethnicity | Site & Setting of Special Education Services | Years in Edu |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ramona | Content Specialist | Multiethnic Latina | • District office | 20 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ruth Bristow | Content Specialist | White | • District office | 9 |
| Alexandria | Content Specialist | Japanese American | • District office | 18 |
| Michelle | Content Specialist | White | • District office | 28 |
| Andy (self) | Content Specialist | Asian American | • District office | 10 |

Ramona began teaching fifteen years ago and has worked in three school districts, mostly in elementary and middle school teaching students with mild to moderate dis/abilities. Ruth taught students with moderate to severe dis/abilities in Illinois for five years before becoming a content specialist with this school district. Ramona and Ruth are my two closest work colleagues and since they started in the job a year before me, I relied on them heavily when I began working as a content specialist. Unsurprisingly, my interviews with them were comfortable, very conversational, and yielded information that I mostly agreed with and already knew, since we talk on a regular basis about work and issues in special education.

Alexandria has worked in education for eighteen years as a substitute para-professional, behavior technician, tutor, and special education teacher. She describes starting her career in education as a volunteer in her friend's classroom. At that time, she had no experience working with students with dis/abilities but soon realized they were just regular kids with different support needs. As a substitute para-professional, Alexandria was able to work in 36 different schools and saw the range of programs and classrooms in the district before teaching her own 3rd to 5th grade moderate to severe autism-focused Special Day Class (SDC). Before becoming a content specialist, Alexandria worked as a behavior technician and homeschool teacher. Alexandria and I work closely together, sit next to each other in the office, and have connected about the lack of diversity in the special education central office. We are two of a handful of people of color in our department and have discussed feeling like our workplace is a very white space.

Michelle was a special education teacher for fourteen years before becoming a content specialist and has been a content specialist for fourteen years. She came into the field because of a personal connection to her cousin with Down syndrome. She was always curious about his education and ended up volunteering at a community center that focused on programming for those with developmental dis/abilities during high school. She enjoyed working with people with dis/abilities and received both her bachelors and master's degrees in special education. Her teaching experiences include 4th/5th grade general education, pre-school and elementary special education, teaching students who are deaf-blind, teaching students with moderate to severe dis/abilities, teaching for three years with the Peace Corps and teaching transition skills to adults aged 18-22. She says she a break from her bachelor's program because she was not understanding the theory that was being discussed in her classes. To get hands-on experience, she worked for a year as a house parent through Catholic Charities with people with high medical needs, before returning to the classroom feeling invigorated to learn. As a content specialist, Michelle has supported elementary schools, non-public schools, private/parochial schools, and the transition program for 18-22-year-old students. I have a very close relationship with Michelle. I see her in the office daily and we try to have lunch together on a weekly basis. Since she is such an experienced content specialist, I ask her for help with work often and we also have a close friendship as well. Next, I will describe how I collected data with the research participants.

### *Researcher as Participant*

I include myself as a participant in this dissertation. I currently work in the special education central office as a content specialist, where I have worked for the last five years. Prior to becoming a content specialist, I was a special education teacher in San Francisco and Oakland.

Although my formal teacher education was in a highly traditional special education program, my orientation to teaching draws heavily from my background in ethnic studies and using an assets-based lens to view our students/families.

**Data Collection**

I obtained data in three ways: narrative interviews, a personal memo log, and review of artifacts. First, a qualitative method of inquiry allowed me to interview and have discussions with district staff and community members who are able to describe and interpret their experiences in detail. The self-created interview protocol was semi-structured, which allowed for open-ended questions. I asked questions that allow the participant to describe their daily work and experiences. The interviews were one-on-one and lasted between twenty to ninety minutes. While I was planning to also observe teachers, due to school closures and Covid-19, schools were closed after March 2020 so I was unable to complete any classroom observations.

The second source of data I collected was via a personal memo book. While I was collecting data during the Spring semester of 2020, I anticipated situations relating to my research questions occurring in my daytime job. As such, the memo book served as a place for me to reflect on my personal experiences and on the interviews. After each interview I logged a reflection, resulting in eleven reflections. I also collected reflections in May 2020 regarding my experiences relating to this research topic. The third source of data was a review of artifacts, information from the school district that are related to my work that I obtained and analyzed which are related to this topic.

For recruitment, I reached out to content specialists via email. I began by emailing specific colleagues with whom I have close relationships with and have discussed these topics previously. All four content specialists I reached out to agreed to participate. Next, of the many

elementary schools within the district, a total of five schools was initially identified help with my special education director. These schools are ones that are either actively discussing the topic of disproportionality or have previously expressed needing more district office support. The two elementary school sites will be ones that I do not directly work with or supervise currently as a part of my district role.

To recruit teachers and parents for my study, I employed a snowball sampling method where potential participants recommended additional participants to me. For teachers, I emailed special education teachers at two of the identified lists of schools and both responded, which solidified the schools I would be focusing on. Once I completed interviews with the special education teachers, I asked them for three general education teacher recommendations. I reached out to all six general education teachers and two ultimately responded and agreed to participate in the interview with me. Lastly, I found community members by tapping into my current network. Through my work as a content specialist, I have met many family members who were discontent with the school district. I generated a list of ten family and community members, reached out to them one by one, and two of them agreed to interview with me. The third family member was recommended to me by one of parents that I interviewed. Below is a table of the participants that I interviewed, their role, and when and how I interviewed them.

**Table 5. Interview Calendar**

| Participant | Role | Interview Date | Location |
|---|---|---|---|
| Alexandria | Content Specialist | 2/4/2020 | In person |
| Ramona | Content Specialist | 2/7/2020 | In person |
| Ruth Bristow | Content Specialist | 2/7/2020 | In person |
| Angela | Parent and Community Member | 2/13/2020 | In person |
| Michelle | Content Specialist | 2/21/2020 | In person |
| Ella | Special Education Teacher and Community Member | 2/26/2020 | In person |
| Amalia | Special Education Teacher | 2/28/2020 | In person |
| Ms. Brown | Parent and Community Member | 3/5/2020 | In person |
| Dolores | General Education Teacher | 5/13/2020 | Via Zoom |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Grace | Parent | 5/19/2020 | Via telephone |
| Shirley | General Education Teacher | 5/25/2020 | Via Zoom |
| Andy (self) | Content Specialist | On-going | On-going |

**Data Analysis**

When analyzing the data, I kept in mind what responsible methodologists should do according to Kuntz (2015). The social justice aims of critical methodologists resists extractivist means by privileging the voices of the individuals and their experiences as having intrinsic value. Extracting information is a violent thing that traditionally goes unnoticed in research, therefore, research should not be able taking knowledge from someone. According to Kuntz (2015), methodologist does not seek to understand a complicated bundle of data but instead looks at the mess and keeps the contradictions and blurry connections, not normalizing the meaning. Moving from logics of extraction of a materialist reorientation would change how I do my research because it is about understanding but not taking during research.

During my interviews, I used the app Otter, which captures audio recordings and produces verbatim transcriptions. Once the rough interview transcripts were autogenerated, I went through and edited them for accuracy. In terms of coding, I used an inductive emergent approach to coding and built a coding guide from scratch once the data was collected (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The reason I did not use a deductive approach, creating a coding guide prior to collecting data, is because I could not predict how participants will answer the questions. Teachers with different experiences and opinions about dis/abled students will answer questions very differently. Also, community members may have dis/abled children themselves who receive special education services and will answer questions differently.

Following the model of code-to-theory in qualitative research by Saldaña (2015), I began coding by using the in vivo strategy by highlighting important phrases and assigning a code to a section of the data, using words and phrases from the participants' language. Once I completed

that for all the interviews, I populated the codes into an Excel spreadsheet in order to organize the codes into four columns. The first column was the participant number, the second column was the code, third column was the line numbers, and the last column was the raw data from the interview transcripts. This spreadsheet helped to organize the data that emerged from the interviews and allowed me to opportunity to visually see the codes in one place. The way I looked for codes was by looking for patterns, which Hatch (2002) describes as looking for things that participants said that are similar, different, frequent, in a sequence, corresponding to other issues and topics, and causation. Due to the rich conversations with my participants, there were many examples of simultaneous coding (Saldaña, 2015), in which multiple codes were used in the same passage. Initial coding of the interviews resulted in 309 unique codes from the eleven participants.

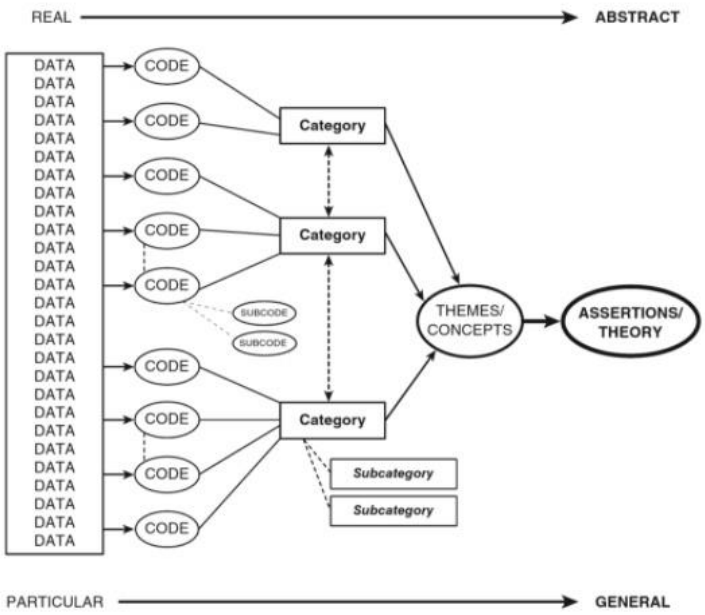


**Figure 1. Codes-to-theory model for qualitative inquiry**

Bhattacharya (2017) describes analysis as iterative and not a linear format. Saldaña (2016) also agrees that coding is a cyclical cycle. Through the data analysis process, I moved back and forth between various stages of the process, re-reading the interview transcripts, coding, sorting

the sorts, reflecting on the codes and raw data, and making connections. Coding allowed me to generate meaning from what the participants responded and in order to continue the process of codifying, or make meaning, from the data, I moved into the next part of the coding process which was organize and grouping similarly coded data into categories or families, based on shared characteristics. This synthesis of combining different codes is a way to further make meaning (Creswell, 2013). These clusters of codes that have similar ideas, meanings, and are the categories of consolidated meaning (Saldaña, 2016). As there were so many codes, I looked for key words such as teacher, school, district, student, and parent to organize all the codes into these categories. I also sorted categories by whether the codes were positive or negative, as some were clearly skewed in one direction. I wanted categories to be focused on a particular population, such sorting the codes into who was impacted (i.e. the student, parent, or teacher) or who would benefit from hearing the feedback (i.e. the school district, special education department, or staff). I was able to sort the 309 individual codes into seventeen categories. I chose not to sort the categories into subcategories but instead continue on with the coding process and sort into themes, as I felt like it would be difficult to tease out the categories and I also did not want to lose the meaning of the category groups.

Moving into themes was difficult, as I was trying to progress from specific experiences and predict patterns that could be observed by different people and contexts. The final themes were formed based on similarity of topics, my analysis through the coding process, as well as keeping in mind research that I read and themes from DisCrit theory. I was able to further group the categories into four main themes. These themes clarified, expanded upon, and condensed the categories by describing the experiences of the participants in their interviews as well as considering the macro elements of special education and treatment of dis/abled students. The

first theme focused on the violence dis/abled students experience in our schools through special education. The second theme focused on the toxic interactions parents have with district staff and ways they engage in activism for dis/abled youth. The third theme describes ways school districts continue to disinvest in our dis/abled students, their families, our teachers. The fourth and final theme includes examples of how schools increase a student's wellbeing and humanizing praxis that are implemented in schools. At this point, I reviewed my three research questions and checked which question the themes would answer, and noted that.

I relied on the direct, verbatim quotes of the participants to support my interpretation. The results in chapter four represents my interpretations of the data but I included many of quotes used by the participants themselves. In addition, I used what Creswell (2013) describes as the horizontalization process, where data from different participants have the same weight. Using quotes and raw data from the participants, I was able to interpret and cross-reference statements made from different participants in order to condense them into themes. By reading the interview transcripts twice coding both times before I moved into the next step of the coding process, my goal was to not miss any key pieces of information before making creating categories and themes for the results. Next, I review the limitations and delimitations of the present study.

**Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

There are three limitations to this dissertation. First, my positionality as a district employee and relationships with those I interviewed posed ethical considerations and opportunities. I thought that my personal connections to this school district would impact the way I engaged with participants in ways that would skew the data. As a district staff member, I am aware of the issues facing our students of color so I felt that I would be too focused on those points. However, I believe ultimately close relationship to my colleagues and ability to

understand the parents I spoke with gave me the opportunity to understand their situations and experiences at a personal level. Second, the sensitive nature of the topic can inhibit critical reflections. Lastly, the results can be generalized, but only to other large urban school districts with similar populations and programs

In terms of delimitations, this study is limited to three research sites: the special education central office and two elementary school sites. Data collection will take place between January 2020 to May 2020. Historical, national, state, and local research has been done on the topic of overrepresentation and this study aims to extend that knowledge by looking at the experiences and resistances of central office staff members. To be in the study, the participants have experience as a special education teacher or general education teacher in the district. Below, I review the ethical considerations considered for the present study.

**Ethical Considerations**

Given the sensitive nature of the topics of special education, race, and the possibility of discussing vulnerable student populations, qualitative researchers must be equally sensitive when conducting research in order to avoid further exploiting marginalized communities. I applied for and obtained permission to conduct research from the school district as well as the University of San Francisco's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS). In addition, all participants received a thorough explanation of the purpose of the study and research methods to be used. Prior to collecting data, I reviewed the formal consent form with each participant, and reiterate that they may withdraw their consent and cease their participation at any time. The recordings of the interviews and interview transcripts was only available to myself and will be destroyed once this research is published. Lastly, to protect the identities of the participants, I used pseudonyms of the schools and for each participant as well. Within this

dissertation, only minimal identifying information will be included to minimize the possibility that the school district, schools or specific teachers are identified. Below, I will share some information on myself as a researcher and how I am personally connected to this community and topic.

**Background on the Researcher**

As a researcher, I identify as a queer, Asian American, able-bodied teacher. I acknowledge that my background influences my perspectives and the way that I approach my work. As an immigrant from Taiwan, I was fortunate to have mostly positive experiences in public school, though upon reflection, my educational upbringing was situated in very traditional middle-class white neighborhoods. I was quiet, obedient, not necessarily the most intelligent, but rewarded with good grades and funneled into the honors and Advanced Placement (AP) track. Like many kids of color, I went through iterations of assimilation and rejection of my identity, insofar as to have at one period of time bleached my hair and wore blue contact lenses. My attempts to whitewash myself was interesting and problematic upon reflection. It would not be until later on in graduate school that I learned that Asian Americans are racial triangulated between white and African Americans (Kim, 1997). In these situations, Asian Americans are compared with and can positioned themselves against African Americans in order to survive. Luckily in college I was introduced to ethnic studies and student organizations that celebrated our cultures and helped me embrace my identity more.

Personally, I am connected to the dis/abled community through a close cousin who is autistic with high support needs. Growing up with him in Taiwan in the 90s, it was clear that he was different. He was non-verbal, sensitive to lights and sounds, and would tantrum every time we were in public. His parents were constantly embarrassed by the stares of strangers. Within the

family, his differences as a taboo never discussed. In schools, he received little to no support and was relegated to floundering in general education classes. We lost touch after I immigrated to the states but reconnected as adults. Now all grown up, he is still quiet and socially awkward but able to share bits and pieces of his experiences growing up and in schools. Unfortunately, Taiwan did not have many support options for individuals such as himself when he was growing up.

As a teacher of color with a background in higher education and ethnic studies, I can relate with and am protective of my students. I come to this research wanting to do work that would benefit others, however, I also recognize that as a non-dis/abled person, I am another do-gooder, hiding behind what Thorius (2019) describes as the cloak of benevolence of special education. Individuals working behind this cloak have positive stereotypes assigned, such as good and patient, which allows for systemic practices, personal beliefs and actions to maintain racist and ableist standards. While I recognize my privilege as an able-bodied, fluent English-speaking professional, I have also pushed myself to be more vocal in work spaces to act in ways that uplift the communities that we are working with.

I became an educator naively wanting to make a difference via the controversial alternative certification route Teach For America. Now a decade into the profession, I have come to realize special education is a highly traditional and colorblind field. Unfortunately, my job in the district office feels far removed from students. What I do day-to-day feels to be the antithesis of why I became an educator, buried in paperwork and talking legalese, though there are moments and instances that I can make positive impacts in our department and in my work. I continue to believe that education can be liberatory for communities of color. Education is empowering and teaching can be transformative for both the teachers and the students. I come to

this research unsure if special education is a space where transformative, humanizing pedagogies can be implemented, but doing this research is helping me to come to terms with these internal conflicts and reflect on my purpose and place in education.

In conclusion, I come to this research trying to better understand my role and how to include anti-racist, anti-ableist, and humanizing practices in special education. I am curious of the daily best practices teachers employ to keep students of color in general education classrooms. Through this research, I hope to understand how we are perpetuating the high numbers of students of color in segregated special education classrooms. My hopes as a scholar is to better understand how I can serve my students, families, and communities better as a district staff member.

# Chapter IV: Findings of the Study

## Overview

The purpose of this study is to highlight the kinds of experiences students and their family's experience in special education related to humanization and violence. In addition to uncovering examples of the kinds of pathologization, invisibilization, and humanization that occurs in special education for our students and their parents, the goal of this dissertation was to gain a better understanding of how special education district staff are working to both reproduce and disrupt the violent exclusion of students of color in special education. This research centers the experiences of parents and students who are being impacted by the exclusionary policies and practices in the district. Data was collected through narrative interviews, a personal memo reflection log, and review of artifacts between January 2020 and May 2020. Once interviews were completed and transcribed, the data was analyzed following the code-to-theme method (Saldaña, 2016), which yielded 309 unique codes, 17 categories, and four main themes.

In this chapter, I present findings in ways that will center the voices of the students and parents who experience violent exclusion and dehumanization within special education systems. Special education is rooted within a larger racist and ableist educational history which maintain these inequalities. Despite the good intentions and individual actions of educators like myself working in special education, the systemic issues continue to be reproduced due to policies and practices that do not value dis/abled students of color. The experiences of the parents and students in the present study highlight the urgency for educators and school districts to make systemic changes.

The findings of this dissertation are organized into four themes that answer the research questions that guide this study, seen in Table 6 below. The first theme honors the voices of

parents, students, and educators who describe the types of violence dis/abled students experience in schools and how students are continuously pathologized, labeled, pushed out, sorted, and punished within special education. The first theme continues with ways dis/abled students continue to be unseen, invisible, ignored, and disregarded in schools. The second theme highlights the voices of the parent participants and lays out their experiences working with and against the school district, the kinds of toxic interactions they have had with school staff, their frustrations with district bureaucratic systems, and how they advocate and engage in activism for dis/abled students. In the third theme, teachers and content specialists discuss how our district continues to disinvest in students and families through a lack of staffing and trainings. District staff also describe the kinds of changes that need to occur in our schools within the third theme. The fourth and final theme include examples of how teachers and two elementary schools within the district have been able to build meaningful relationships with students and families through empathy and care. Teachers shared how they were able to validate and empower their students' identities. As a result of their actions, they were able to increase their student's sense of belonging in the school community. I see these relationships and pedagogical choices as humanizing praxis. Throughout the findings section, I will include my insights as a content specialist and reflections working in my role. I also include ways I have both supported the violent exclusion of dis/abled students and parents and ways I supported humanizing praxis as well.

**Table 6. Themes and Research Questions They Answer**

| Themes | Answers Which Research Questions |
|---|---|
| Theme 1: Violence Against Dis/abled Students | 1 and 2 |
| Theme 2: School District Disregard for Parents | 2 and 3 |
| Theme 3: Disinvestment in Students and Families | 2 and 3 |
| Theme 4: Sense of Belonging and Humanizing Praxis | 1 |

As a reminder, below is information on each of the participants in this study. In order to include perspectives from the participants that factor in their lived experiences and the lens in which they view education, demographic information is shown in the table above. Their race and ethnicity listed will help inform the analysis of this research.

**Table 7. Demographic Information on Participants**

| Participant | Role | Race and Ethnicity | Site & Setting of Special Education Services |
|---|---|---|---|
| Grace | Parent | Chinese American | • Daughter is in the 11th grade. She attended public schools (elementary, middle, and high) in the district before transferring to a mental health focus non-public school during 10th grade |
| Angela | Parent | White | • Son is in the 11th grade. He attended a public K-8 charter school in the school district before transferring to a non-public school in the 9th grade |
| Ms. Brown | Parent | White | • Son is an 11th grader in a public school in the district. He also attended public elementary and middle schools in the school district<br>• Ms. Brown is also employed by the school district within the special education department |
| Ella | Special Ed. Teacher and Family Member | African American | • Teaches at Bayview ES (public school)<br>• Nephew attended a public high school in the district before transferring to a residential non-public school |
| Dolores | General Ed. Teacher | Latina Latinx | • Teaches at Bayview ES (public school) |
| Shirley | General Ed. Teacher | African American | • Teaches at Lower Haight ES (public school) |
| Amalia | Special Ed. Teacher | Latina Latinx | • Teaches at Lower Haight ES (public school) |
| Ramona | Content Specialist | Multiethnic Latina | • District office |
| Ruth Bristow | Content Specialist | White | • District office |
| Alexandria | Content Specialist | Japanese American | • District office |
| Michelle | Content Specialist | White | • District office |
| Andy (self) | Content Specialist | Asian American | • District office |

## Theme 1: Violence Against Dis/abled Students

Dis/abled students and their parents experience inordinate levels of violence from teachers, administrators, and district staff. These individual educators embody special education systems that are rooted in systemic racism and ableism. We enact violent practices such as labeling, pushing out, sorting, punishing, and inflicting social, emotional, and physical pain on our students. Educators like myself need to recognize that our actions contribute to the pain that our students and their families experience and is maintaining exclusion and marginalization of bodies that are non-white and labeled as dis/abled. Within the first subtheme of this section, parents, students, teachers, and content specialists' participants share examples of ways students are viciously pathologized. The second subtheme includes ways students are mistreated and invisibilized and the third subtheme discusses ways black and brown students specifically have been systemically removed from our schools

### *Pathologizing of Differences*

Special educators are able to hide behind the cloak of benevolence (Thorius, 2019) and are seen by many as do-gooders who work tirelessly to fix our most damaged students. This kind of dysconsciousness distorts our understanding of inequalities that exists in schools and allows for racist and ableist polices to remain invisible and resilient over time. I began my interviews with parent participants (Angela, Grace, and Ms. Brown) by asking them how schools responded to their children's unique learning needs. Angela talked about her son feeling isolated, feeling like an outcast, and ashamed for being different. When he attended public school, Angela said:

> He didn't like being pulled [out of class] for speech therapy. It made him feel like something was wrong with him. One of his accommodations was to use a computer but none of the other kids did, so he didn't want to do it. He's at the age where he's already

> getting picked on by everybody. [The school was] trying to do stuff that didn't make sense for my kid. He learned that it's not good to be smart. His regular classroom became an obstacle to learning. I've had to teach him, sometimes when you're in class with a group of people, [even if you know the material already], you have to let them [review], even if you're ready to move on. So that's why [the general education classroom] is very restrictive for him. He's learned a lot of bad study habits and has bad self-esteem. To this day, he thinks there's something wrong with him (Angela, personal communication, 2/13/2020).

Angela's son eventually transferred to a non-public school, which are for-profit, private, entirely segregated schools that focus on teaching students with specific learning profiles or dis/abilities. Once her son transferred to this non-public school that specializes in teaching autistic youth, Angela said:

> He went from failing, miserable, suicidal, to a kid who last year was on student council. He has a friend [now], he hasn't had a friend [before]. He wants to go to school, he wants to study. He's still autistic, still has an anxiety disorder and ADHD, but he's someplace where they can address it without singling him out. His interest in learning has returned. He needed to be at a non-public school, he needed that environment. They have counselors at all times [who] he can go to. He's had to learn to advocate [for himself]. He's just whizzing through [his classes]. He's maintaining a 3.8 GPA and taking college classes right now. He's in 11$^{th}$ grade classes as a 10$^{th}$ grader. All those [services] that the district was pulling him out for is integrated into his day. He doesn't know he's getting speech [therapy] or social skills. Once we got to [this school], we saw what [he was capable of] (Angela, personal communication, 2/13/2020).

In the general education setting, Angela's son struggled to fit in socially and he was invisible to his teachers since his needs were not academic. When Angela recognized that his learning needs were not being met, she heavily advocated for his transfer into a non-public school. Whereas many African American and Latinx students are forced into non-public schools for misbehaving, many white families such as Angela's send their children to non-public schools with specific academic or socio-emotional programs.

Next, Grace discussed in our interview her struggles to address her daughter's mental health needs on her own, without IEP services. As opposed to Angela's son who was receiving too many visible classroom accommodations, Grace's daughter went unnoticed for years by her teachers. Grace's daughter attended multiple middle and high schools and at each, she was the quiet, shy, Asian American student who struggled socially. Since she was not acting out behaviorally, her counselors and teachers did not realize that she had severe school and social anxiety. After years of low grades and poor attendance, she finally qualified for an IEP, was labeled Emotionally Disturbed (ED), and began receiving some leniency and support from school. I met Grace and her daughter at an IEP meeting in 2019 to discuss schools that could better address her daughter's needs. At the end of the meeting, I offered her daughter a transfer to a mental health focused non-public school, which they accepted.

During our interview, Grace said that the new school has not been sensitive to her daughter's unique needs as an Asian American student. Grace said that this school only offers the same one-size-fits-all program, which includes daily individual, group, and parent counseling. Grace daughter does not respond well to psychotherapy and completely withdraws during group therapy with peers and in counseling sessions with her mom. Knowing this, the school continues to force her to attend three therapy sessions per day, fifteen sessions per week. Grace said:

> Knowing her as a mother, [group and family] therapy is not really going to help because I went… to a 10-week outpatient [therapy with her previously]. Even though [the school] say it's benefitting her, knowing her it's not really going to help. When we were in the outpatient therapy, it was two and a half hours every week, my god it was like bringing her to prison. I don't know how well that kind of therapy will benefit her. She liked to talk to people when they click but group therapy is not the right place for her to feel like she can talk. [It just adds] anxiety and stress and [the program] is not individualized. You as the therapy program coordinator did not look at [her individual needs]. Maybe your program has ten parts and you offer to all ten to IEP students, but maybe only seven of the areas work for this student, numbers one to seven. Maybe number four and number nine is benefitting to [another] person. So, you need to make a little bit modification and not expecting all the kids to participate from one to ten and so far, I don't see them willing to make the change (Grace, personal communication, 5/19/2020).

Unlike Angela's son, Grace's daughter's experience shows that a non-public school is not always the solution for students. The traditional ways that schools consider interventions are race-neutral, are not culturally or historically centered but instead focuses on locating deficits within the child (Annamma, et al., 2013). This non-public school disregarded Grace's daughter's voice, her identity as an Asian American girl, her experiences and preferences. Despite voicing her concerns that she was responding poorly to being overtherapized, the school did not listen but continued to force this particular form of treatment on her daughter. Non-public schools offer very specific programs, which may not fit everyone. Grace's daughter's experiences shed light on the fact educators are quick to pathologize differences in students and we lack skills to identify and respond appropriately to our student's mental health needs. I felt such regret after

Grace's interview for suggesting this placement. Supporting mental health is a sensitive issue so I approach offering this particular non-public school with caution now. Reflecting on Grace's interview, I felt motivated to have deeper dialogue with families about the pros and cons of this non-public school and to support Grace with understanding how to get her daughter back into public schools.

Moving onto my interview with Ms. Brown, she said that many of her son's teachers ignored his learning needs and at times even disregarded his IEP entirely. Ms. Brown said:

> [He is] a very high functioning autistic [with] anxiety, ADHD, dysgraphia nonverbal learning [needs]. He has very slow processing, very poor working memory, and a very high vocabulary. Because of the difficulty with processing the working memory and the dysgraphia, elementary school was almost impossible. The sensory piece on top, he couldn't filter out what was going on in the classroom. He would sound incredibly intelligent. We laugh he always sounded like a 35-year-old man and yet, the output would look like a preschooler had done it. [As he got older], he really struggled with organization, handwriting, and attention to tasks, which sounds like very small things but became pretty big things when we talk about like school refusal. [This] was the time before dyslexia and dysgraphia exited [according to the school]. [The school said they] don't provide any support for dysgraphia, it's not an IEP thing (Ms. Brown, personal communication, 3/5/2020).

Similar with Grace's daughter, Ms. Brown's sons learning profile was disregarded and at times invisible. Ms. Brown said that many of his teachers blamed him or his parents for his disorganization and learning needs. One day, Ms. Brown and her son met with the special education teacher. The teacher "looked at him and [said] you know what the problem isn't a

disability. Problem is, you're not motivated, you're just lazy. If you wanted to you could do this. [She said this] in front of the parent which just blows me away" (Ms. Brown, personal communication, 3/5/2020). Ms. Brown's comments are shocking, that a teacher would make such accusations, to be so dismissive of a student's documented learning needs, and to say such discriminatory things to a student and his mom. This experience relates to DisCrit and reminds us about the social constructions of ability and the shifting boundaries in special education. Whoever is in power is able to control what is considered normal and abnormal. This arbitrary line moves to benefit those in power, however, the shifting line produces very real material and psychological effects based on which side of the line you fall on. For Ms. Brown's son, dyslexia and dysgraphia were not considered recognized dis/abilities at that time so he did not receive support for those needs, although they are recognized now by our school district. Ms. Brown's experience shed light on the fact that schools are quick to label student, the understanding and definitions of learning differences change over time, that certain eligibilities are not accepted by teachers, and when that happens, students and parents are blamed. The way Ms. Brown's son was treated are examples of dis/ability microaggressions. Dávila (2015) describes these microaggressions as layered insults, however, I believe they are much more severe than simple negative comments about a student. These racialized, gendered, and ableist assumptions are directed at dis/abled students and accumulate over time. Ms. Brown's son- a white, middle-class, male student- had his learning differences dismissed by his teachers. These micro-aggressive comments from his teachers highlight the kinds of ableism that circulate in our schools the assumptions we as teachers have about students who look and learn differently.

To summarize, dis/abled students experience many forms of violence in schools. Their learning needs are pathologized and when their needs become too problematic to handle, folx in

roles like mine step in and offer placements in separate school settings. Angela's son had to endure many years of bullying and felt isolated and outcasted when he was attending a public school. He was forced to learn at a pace that was either too slow or too quickly and although he was in general education, he was pulled out of class for all of his special education services, which further made him feel like an outsider. Grace's daughter was ignored in public schools and now in the non-public school setting, continues to be dismissed by her teachers even after voicing her opinion and ideas about what treatment she would benefit most from. Ms. Brown's son had to endure many discriminatory and ableist comments from his teachers, who did not understand or accept his learning needs. In the section below, I will discuss violence against dis/abled students in the form of invisibility and mistreatment from educators like myself.

### *Invisibility and Mistreatment*

All of the parents that I interviewed discussed how student dis/abilities and needs are unseen, invisible, ignored, or disregarded, which leads to different treatment in the school setting. In addition, dis/abled students are encouraged by teachers to remain invisible by blending into the general education classrooms, keeping their learning needs hidden, and conforming to the normative standards. If they are unable to do that, then they are funneled into entirely separate classrooms and schools. This section describes how schools ignore the needs of dis/abled students in ways that continue to uphold notions of normalcy at the expense of our students. Race-neutral school policies place deficits in children and not the schools themselves.
It is not just about individually bad or misguided actors, it is about the entire school system. The pathological violence is rooted in everything such as: school policies, structures, curriculum, beliefs about dis/abled students and assumptions about parents and communities.

Educators are often either highly observant, sensing and diagnosing students too frequently, or completely ignoring of student individual learning needs. Angela, Grace, Ms. Brown all expressed frustration that the needs of their children have been ignored by many educators. As an aunt, Ella also adds an example of how her nephew was highly invisible until the school could no longer ignore him.

Regarding the invisibility of ableists ideologies that circulate in public schools, Angela said that her son began visibly struggling socially and academically in 6th grade. At that time, he was self-harming, had suicidal ideation, and was refusing to go to school. After he received a medical autism diagnoses and became eligible for an IEP and he stayed in the general education classroom but struggled to get good grades and make friends. Due to his high IQ, his social and emotional needs were ignored by his teachers. Angela said:

> It was horrible [when he was in public school]. He would go to school and the kids would tell him to go away. [Sometimes] I'd come [to the school during] an assembly to see how he was. I'd see him trying to be make a friend [but] he didn't know how to. [When one of] his classmates got a little award, he went over them to say congratulations, but it wasn't the appropriate time or the place [so the kid told him to] stop and go away. I saw him so dejected. [He tried to talk to a] teacher about it but the teachers were too busy with other stuff. Anything [this school did] didn't make sense to my kid. [Now at the non-public school], they are finally not trying to keep [my son] in a box anymore and we now are looking at him for who he is. [My son's] big issues are not academic but emotional. [He has] a lot of anxiety… so he has therapy, and we have therapy with him together because that's what he needs (Angela, personal communication, 2/13/2020).

Angela's son struggled to conform to the expectations that we place on all students to behave and respond in specific ways in classrooms, which led to his marginalization by peers and teachers. Since he was not struggling academically, his social and emotional needs were ignored and invisible, however, those needs are highly important for our students. Angela's son is now able to succeed in a school setting where his idiosyncrasies are embraced and he is getting the types of services and supports that needs, without feeling outcasted.

Continuing on with ways student's needs are often disregarded by teachers, Grace's daughter was at home with her during our interview on 5/19/2020, and when she heard our phone conversation about how her non-public school is not meeting her needs, she also chimed in behind her mom. Grace said:

> She's behind me right now and she says that she is so stressed that she cannot learn [since there are] three therapy sessions a day: 9am, 12pm, and 3pm. She eventually told the [therapist], the whole point is for you guys to help me [feel] more relaxed and stuff like that, and by going to the group therapy it actually stressing me out more. By not going, I feel more relaxed and now you're pushing me to join again. [As her mom], to tell you the truth, it is true, observing her at home. In the beginning… when she had to go to those group, she was stressed because she doesn't like to share in small group. She is more relaxed now [that she is not going to group therapy]. So that's what I say, yes, I understand you have a program but I want to say that it's good because she is verbalizing [her needs] (Grace, personal communication, 5/19/2020).

This is an example of a student speaking up about what works for them and the school not listening. Grace's daughter is almost a grown adult and is asking for some modifications to her

program, however, it does not seem like the school is being very flexible, instead they are completely disregarding what she is saying.

Similar with Grace's daughters' voice being disregarded, Ms. Brown highlight ways her son was mistreated during elementary school. Ms. Brown said that at that time, he was struggling both academically and socially and falling behind his peers. When it was clear that many of his services were not being provided and his IEP was not being followed, their family hired special education advocates and attorneys to represent them. Her son was offered compensatory services, independent evaluations, and other supports paid for by the district. Ms. Brown explains why she was frustrated during her son's elementary school years. Ms. Brown explained:

> From kindergarten, we were told that the school wouldn't be able to fulfill his IEP. From like the first week of school, [they just said] sorry, we don't provide those services here. Sorry, if that's what he needs, that's not what we do. In fifth grade his teachers decided that they didn't need to follow the IEP and they created their own rules and just blatantly wouldn't follow the IEP. His services were not being provided at all. His social skills [decreased so much. They would make him play] in a group play on the yard, which was really overwhelming for him as a kid on the spectrum to have a bunch of really loud kids playing tag, which was a game he didn't understand (Ms. Brown, personal communication, 2/13/2020).

When her son was being re-assessed in 5$^{th}$ grade, Ms. Brown said:

> The school therapist that we had known since he was in kindergarten pulled me aside and said [the school is] going to [demit him from special education]. Whatever you do, don't let them do the [testing]. The two general education teachers and the special education teacher who called him lazy, have all decided to demit him and they told me. [They

> already know] the outcome of the assessment should be that he does not qualify [for an IEP]. How fricking illegal is that? (Ms. Brown, personal communication, 2/13/2020).

Ms. Brown describes very contentious interactions between the family and school staff. By the time her son was in 5th grade, it had gotten so bad that school staff were planning to exit him from special education and stop all services, behind the family's back. This stemmed from school staff not understanding his learning needs, disregarding the student's IEP, and likely thinking it would just be easier for staff if he did not have an IEP. Considering why staff would feel this way, I could understand that Ms. Brown's family is white, seems well off, and has already received so many additional supports and services through his IEP. Oftentimes, staff members feel frustrated with certain families working special education in their favors, and we see inequities since not all families end up receiving as much support. This is not to justify or support the abhorrent behaviors and treatment Ms. Brown and her son received, but a statement to complicated why teachers may act the way they do.

Students needs are not only invisible to teachers, they could also be unseen by their parents. As an Asian American mother, Grace mentions multiple times in our interview that when her daughter first began struggling in school, she was not ready to accept any mental health diagnosis's or recommendations. She said:

> Either I was in denial or it wasn't really emphasized [by her teachers], it's just not the right timing, main thing probably? And the right person to say it. Also, not until at [her alternative high school], was she actually in the hospital twice. It was brought out more by the school (Grace, personal communication, 5/19/2020).

This is common in Asian American families and many cultures, where mental health needs are swept under the rug. It was interesting to hear Grace's reflections that it took time and two hospitalizations for her to realize how severe things had gotten for her daughter.

The next student experience I want to highlight is Ella's nephews. For Ella's nephew, although he had a diagnosis and IEP, the school missed many warning signs and his cries for help. Two days prior to his nervous breakdown at school, he voiced many irrational fears and was actively hallucinating. Ella said:

> He went to the nurse with a water bottle [and] kept spitting in it, and told her that he was making calcium to cure himself and she said to him, she showed him something online and said no, spit is just water, there's no calcium. When they're being irrational, they're crying out for help [and it is] beyond your scope…that's when you go out and get that extra help (Ella, personal communication, 2/26/2020).

Ella said that the nurse did not let the administrator or case manager know and nobody from the school alerted the family of his increasing hallucinations. The situation escalated quickly. Ella's nephew eloped from the school, traveled far away, and was arrested during this manic period. As a result of the school ignoring his needs, he was ultimately placed at a residential treatment facility by the school district.

To summarize, DisCrit reminds us that schools are spaces where racism and ableism circulate interdependently in invisible ways that uphold notions of normalcy. When students inhabit spaces that are outside those norms, their needs and voices are ignored. Due to his high IQ, Angela's son's social-emotional needs are ignored. Grace says daughter's voice continues to be disregarded and her school relentlessly forces a one-size-fits-all program. Although Ms. Brown's son had an IEP, his teachers disregarded his IEP entirely and tried to demit him from

special education. In the next section, I will discuss ways our schools have been designed with the help of special education to both label and remove students from the general education setting.

### *Systemic Forced Removal of Black and Brown Bodies*

This section focuses on the ways that special education has active systems in place to forcibly remove students from the general education classroom. Specifically, boys of color labeled with dis/abilities are the primary victims of segregated placements. Once a student is labeled with a dis/ability, educators like myself enact pedagogies of pathologizations, and any misbehaviors or resistance they may show to teachers results in considerations for placements in segregated classrooms or schools. Teachers and content specialists describe the ways their black and brown boys are pushed out of schools. I will also provide my experiences and reflections on referring students into segregated settings.

During the interview, I asked the participants how and why students are referred into segregated classrooms. The content specialists I interviewed said that quite often, schools push out students for misbehaving. Michelle, Ruth, Alexandria and Ramona all mention that many young elementary boys of color who misbehave are seen as dangerous and funneled either into a Special Day Class (SDC) or into our district's classroom for students with severe emotional or behavioral needs, called the Success Opportunity Achievement Resilience (SOAR) program. Our school district actively engages in pedagogies of pathologizations (Annamma, 2017), which include hyper-surveillance, hyper-labeling, and hyper-punishment for students who do not fit the unspoken and desired normative standards. Content Specialists like myself are taught to explain change of placements to families as a way for their child to get additional services and supports. Despite knowing that students who learn in segregated settings do not have better outcomes, our

district continues to create new segregated classrooms and we keep funneling mostly black and brown students into these settings.

In her interview, Alexandria mentioned that many teachers said to her: “we can’t handle him, he needs to go” (Alexandria, personal communication, 2/4/2020). This is not a unique statement, many teachers who feel flustered with teaching students who misbehave or students who learn differently vehemently advocate for them to be moved into Special Day Classes (SDCs). Regarding who is referred for Special Day Classes (SDCs), Ruth said:

> If it’s a primarily African American school then obviously the students that are going to be referred just happen to be African American and that’s representative of the school population but I think where you see the disproportionately being even more obvious is when the whole school is not African American and [they’re] the only kids you’re bringing forward [for change of placements]. My schools [with higher African American populations] definitely have a higher tolerance for behavior. [We need to have] a continuum [of classes] within the schools where you’re not shipping these kids to a whole another school [across the city] (Ruth, personal communication, 2/7/2020).

Ruth’s describes the dangers of being the singular African American student at a school and highlights another issue when changing school placements. Since Special Day Classes (SDCs) are only at certain schools, when a student moves into that program, oftentimes they are having to attend a school in an entirely new school and community. Despite this school district being geographically small, it can be highly difficult for a student and their family to adjust to a new school community.

Alexandria said all the students she’s recommended for classroom for student’s labeled with emotional or behavioral dis/abilities have been either African American or Latinx boys who

had behaviors labeled as extreme. In considering factors that lead to students being referred out of the general education setting, Alexandria said:

> If white or Asian kids [engage] in these behaviors… people [say] no no no, they don't need SOAR. I had one white kid in a diagnostic SOAR placement that was like shocking. He [eventually] went to an NPS. He stands out in my memory because he's the only white student [that I know of who went to SOAR]. I'm finding more kiddos with extreme behaviors at my lower SES schools. The schools have lower SES and higher number of African American Latino students. My other schools that are more Asian and white, they're not having those referrals. I'm like why is it I keep getting these referrals? The higher SES families that are more white and Asian, not so much. Why is that? Is that why there's this overrepresentation because in our country, families with lower SES tend to be black and Latino? (Alexandria, personal communication, 2/4/2020).

Interestingly, Alexandria points outs issues of race and class in her comments above. She describes that black and brown students from lower-income families are the ones typically referred to our segregated classrooms. In our district, this program for students with severe emotional and behavioral needs is now thought of as the one exclusively for black and brown students. Although white and Asian families are also offered placement in these classrooms, they tend to decline the offer and request non-public schools instead. This is highly troubling because in addition to these students having the dis/ability label, the funneling of black and brown boys into the Success Opportunity Achievement Resilience (SOAR) program has been normalized.

Similar with Alexandria, Shirley said that all of her students who have been referred out for the Success Opportunity Achievement Resilience (SOAR) program have all been African

American boys. Her thoughts below describe how behaviors from boys are perceived differently than in girls. Shirley said:

> They have all been black boys. I don't know, maybe when you're a boy, it's the testosterone and it makes you behave differently. I think some of those behaviors get perceived differently by staff than girls right so when she's upset, she's yelling, she's screaming, she's hitting things. When he's upset, he's hitting people, right? So, I think one of those behaviors is perceived as management and the other behavior is perceived as dangerous or scary. So, I witnessed a teacher last year, and I was so mad at her, she was a student teacher, but she jumped out of the way when he was [having a tantrum]. Now this kid just thinks that this lady is scare of me. For some reason, the behavior of the little boys is perceived differently than the behavior of the little girl (Shirley, personal communication, 5/25/2020).

Shirley's comments add another layer to the conversation about gender. As Dancy (2014) says about the adultification of black boys, educators are quick to label their behaviors as violent, dangerous, and the segregation of their bodies are normalized in school settings. Similar with Annamma (2017), who found that that students are punished for misbehaving but are also expected to fix themselves through the rhetoric of responsibility. By implementing pedagogies of pathologizations, we as teachers also ignore our social, political, and material responsibilities by placing the burden on the students entirely. Below I will include personal reflections on the change of placements that I facilitated for students during the 2019-2020 school year.

**Researcher Experiences with Change of Placements.** During the 2019-2020 school year, I participated in and facilitated the change of placements for fifteen students. These students attended comprehensive public schools but due to issues unique to them were offered

placements at non-public schools outside of the district. Students are referred into a non-public school for reasons such as not making academic progress, misbehaving in school, and when their mental health needs too severe for the school to handle. Each of these referrals involved me working closely with each of the student's families, school teams and outside providers. While the behavioral referrals were clear examples of students being pushed out, we also had many students who were experiencing mental health crises and were thought of to need a non-public school. Below is a table summarizing the students who I facilitated referrals to non-public schools for and personal reflections and thoughts.

**Table 8. Student Non-Public School Referrals**

| Student | Race and Ethnicity | Reason for Non-Public School Referral | Outcome |
|---|---|---|---|
| A | Latinx | Behavior, Defiance | Student was referred to non-public school due to her behaviors which led to her expulsion. Parent declined referral to non-public school and student remained in public school |
| B | African American | Behavior, Defiance | Parent was open to non-public school but student highly against non-public school. Student remains at public school |
| C | Asian American | Behavior, Defiance | The student was uncooperative at school, had daily tantrums which led to suspensions. Parents open to non-public school |
| D | Middle Eastern | Behavior, Parent Requested | Family refused to send student to public school and requested non-public school that specializes in working with students on the spectrum. Student referred to non-public school and awaiting placement |
| E | White | Mental Health, Parent Requested | Parents unilaterally placed at a residential facility and district has agreed to pay |
| F | White | Mental Health, Parent Requested | Parents unilaterally placed at an out of state residential facility and district has agreed to pay |
| G | White | Drug usage and high-risk behaviors | Student was offered a residential treatment facility but graduated that semester from public school. Parent was open to residential treatment facility. |
| H | Latinx | Mental Health | Highly anxious student, offered non-public school, student ended up moving away |
| I | African American | Mental Health | Student accepted residential placement offer but after 4 months, the parent took the student out of |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | school and we are unable to locate them |
| J | Latinx | Mental Health | Student was accepted by the non-public school offer and had to be escorted to the school |
| K | Latinx | Mental Health | Family accepted non-public school offer but the student ran away over the summer and we are unable to find the student |
| L | Latinx | Drug usage and mental health | Family accepted non-public school offer and student was placed at a residential facility |
| M | African American | Drug usage and mental health | Family accepted non-public school and awaiting residential placement |
| N | Latinx | 5150ed and high-risk behaviors | Student had been suicidal and hospitalized many times but improved with mental health support and was not placed at residential facility |
| O | Latinx | Mental Health | Student has severe school avoidance and we were unable to get the family into school for a meeting. Unable to connect with student or family. |

Students A, B, C and D were referred for non-public schools based on defiance, talking back to teachers, not attending class, being uncooperative with adults, or having tantrums at school. Student A and B, who are Latinx and African American respectively, had been in the Success Opportunity Achievement Resilience (SOAR) program for multiple years and both rejected the non-public school offer that I made. Both students were highly vocal during the meeting, expressed adamantly not wanting to attend a non-public school, and said that they felt like they were getting kicked out. Both students also mentioned this was not the first time the school had tried to get them out. For Students A and B, they were experiencing what DisCrit describes as the interconnected and collusive nature of racism and ableism, in which racism validates and reinforces ableism for students of color. In their cases, race did not exist outside of ability and both were enmeshed in the fabric of the cultures of their schools and invisibilized. Furthermore, both of these students had experienced years of "goodness profiling" (Collins, 2013), a classification that teachers place on students to regulate, police, and control their bodies. Due to their misbehaviors in schools and their antagonistic relationship to authority figures, the

students were labeled as bad, dis/abled, and continued to experience attempts by the school to control and label them.

Student C is on the spectrum and was also misbehaving in school. Despite years of services in a moderate to severe Special Day Class (SDC), Student C had an incident where he eloped off-campus, broke a car window, and ran into on-coming traffic. Student C's parent, who is Chinese American and not a native English speaker, was immediately agreeable to the non-public school offer to my surprise. Since I also speak Chinese, I had many private conversations with Student C's mom following the IEP meeting to explain what she was consenting to. It turns out she has three children, all with IEPs, and her eldest son attended a residential treatment facility so she understood what a non-public school was. Student C's parent was tired of the school penalizing Student C and felt that moving to this non-public school was not ideal but necessary so he could stop getting into trouble. Students A, B and C were the ones mostly clearly being forced out of schools due to misbehaving. Referrals to non-public schools for behavior are the most subjective, since the teachers and staff who are penalizing and labeling their behaviors and the ones recommending the referral out. Sadly, even as our district has started encouraging staff to be anti-racist, students of color in special education continue to be punished for minor things like defiance.

In contrast, none of the white students on my list were referred to a non-public school due to behaviors or defiance. All three of the white families on this list that I worked with appeared to have social and economic capital and were able to use their resources to quickly place their child in a new school. Students E and F, both white, and their families had access to legal counsel, and were both unilaterally placed at a residential treatment facility by their families for mental health concerns related to anxiety and depression. Unilateral placement means parents

place the students at the non-public school themselves and asks the district for reimbursement. Families who have the resources and knowledge about special education laws are able to make special education work in their favor.

Latinx students is the largest group I made non-public school offers for, a total of seven students. Three of them were offered residential treatment programs, three were offered treatment programs locally, and one student we were not able to hold a meeting for. I spent the most time and energy thinking about these students due to the kinds of issues they were experiencing which prompted the non-public school offers, such as multiple suicide attempts, heavy drug usage, and possible child trafficking. Only Students H, J, and L have successfully transitioned into their new school placements. Student J's family knew their child would not voluntarily attend this residential school so since she was a minor, her parents allowed for the district to escort her to the school. Being escorted to the school means the district pays for people to come to their house in the middle of the night and forcibly take the student onto a plane and to their new residential school. When I first heard that this is something we do to students, I could not believe it. Another student I worked with previously who was also escorted to their new placement in the dead of night, described how traumatizing it was for them to be woken up by strangers, tied up, and taken out of the state while their parents were watching. I heavily advocate parents against escorting students to new placements. This incredibly dehumanizing experience is tolerated and adds additional stress and trauma for our students who need the most compassion and care.

The Latinx students and families that I worked with had intense needs and have been the ones that have taken the longest time to find placements for. Many of their families are monolingual Spanish and trusted the school district to offer appropriate services. Most of these

families were also receiving wrap-around mental health and family support from community-based organizations. Although I am still opposed to any student being placed in segregated settings, for these seven students who were experiencing so much in their life, it was clear that the public school was not meeting their needs. Getting their child into a non-public school for was sometimes a matter of life or death.

On the other side of the coin, there is a process called stepdown, which is a term we use to describe students who attended a non-public school and are deemed ready to return to the school district. During the 2019-2020 school year I only facilitated one student stepping down. For the most part, students who attend a non-public school stay there until graduation or until they age out at 22. The one student who I supported with stepping down was returning from a local day-treatment program after attending that non-public school for three years. She went to that non-public school due to issues with anxiety and depression but her therapists, teachers, and she herself said she was ready to return to a comprehensive high school. She is a white female student with a highly involved parent, and she is one of a few success stories of a student going to a non-public school and returning to a comprehensive school.

In addition, I supported two families with children attending residential out of state programs. Both students are female and Latinx and returned to the district by revoking consent on their IEP. Revoking the IEP means a family in disagreement with the services outlined in the IEP and they want to cancel their services. Essentially, the school district is forcing them to stay at their non-public school, and the family and student disagrees and want to come back home. When the family revokes consent, they automatically return to the district as a general education student. Knowing these two students and families, they had similar experiences, highly distrusted the school district, and revoked consent as a last resort, as that was the only power and agency

they had. Revocation of IEP services is example of special education's violent oppression of students in a field that values professionals' opinions over the voices and experiences of the students and families we are serving. In these instances, students are expected to meet certain criteria in order to prove to the district that they are ready to reintegrate back with public school. The longer I work in special education, the more revocations I come across, with families who are highly discontent with the poor outcomes for children who receive special education services. During our interview, Michelle questioning the effectiveness of special education for students who are sent to residential programs, Michelle wondered:

> What happens when [the student] comes back at 18 or 22? Are you reading? Can you find a job? Can you manage your explosive behavior? We're making a whole layer of people in our community [who become outsiders]. We can't force anybody to come to school so it's a lot of trying to get family engagement, family trust, and sometimes it's really hard. The sooner you come back the better outcomes I think you're going to have. I think when you're out for a long time you get disconnected from where you are (Michelle, personal communication, 2/2/2020).

Michelle's quote summarizes what I continue to think about for students that we force into non-public school schools. These segregated settings are not the magic solutions for our most vulnerable students, so why is this an option when we know that students will have trouble returning? How do we continue to refer students into these schools knowing that we are doing so because we have failed to support them in public schools? Why do we not shift our focus and resources into making public schools the place where all students can be successful?

In summary, this section aimed to highlight the voices of students and parents in order to support educators like myself with understanding the kinds of violence students experiences in

our schools. The first theme was able to answer research questions one and two by describing the kinds of intense violence our students and their families experience in schools and ways they and their families. In many ways, educators are working individually and collectively to uphold special education's system of pathologizing students and systems to forcibly remove students from our classrooms. Educators label students, try to put them in a box, only acknowledge certain kinds of learning differences, while often ignoring and disregarding student and parent opinions. The special education department, myself, and my colleagues, are all working collectively to reinforce the continuum of classrooms and facilitating segregation of many students. Whereas Angela's son found success at the non-public school, many students including Grace's daughter consented to the placement because they had no other options.

In our school district, teacher and content specialists said that African American students are at more risk of being labeled with dis/abilities if they attend schools with a low black student population. Participants describe low income black and brown boys in particular have been targets for these referrals. Our district's Success Opportunity Achievement Resilience (SOAR) classrooms have been designed and continue to funnel black and brown boys in particular into them. In my personal reflections, I recount my experiences referring students into non-public schools and factors that led to the referrals. While some of the referrals to non-public schools for socio-emotional and mental health issues are understandable, the referrals specifically for misbehaving are the ones I find most problematic and challenging to discuss with IEP teams. Special education has been created in order to sort and funnel students into specific programs. I have overheard and been in conversations with old school special educators, like my supervisors and our department directors, about their strong belief in segregated programs and how newer teachers going through teaching programs are overly open to full inclusion. In this instance, I

would consider myself one of the newer teachers as I went through my special education program that endorsed full inclusion as opposed to separate classes and programs. These differing perspectives even within our own department show that there is still a high level of disagreement with what inclusion means and how it can look like in public education.

Participants shared how dis/abled students inhabit unique spaces within schools. At times their dis/abilities are invisible and disregarded, but at other times, their dis/abilities are brought to the forefront in negative ways. Dis/abled students have to endure microaggressions from teachers who do not understand their learning needs. Participants shared Asian and white students tend to be more invisible while African American and Latinx students are scrutinized more closely. DisCrit encourages educators to acknowledge that schools center whiteness, which allows structures that oppress students of color to continue (Connor et al., 2019). Participants brought up how schools try to make invisible student individual struggles and the hyper-focus on producing results instead of imparting real skills for our students. The next findings theme, parent participants share their experiences and ways they engage with and against the school district.

**Theme 2: School District Disregard for Parents**

Despite being the most important adult figures in a child's life and member of the IEP team, parents are often disregarded and disrespected by educators. This section centers the voices of parents of children labeled with dis/abilities and highlights the virulent interactions they have with school staff which led to distrust. Educators like myself need to remember the importance of listening to parents, not demonizing them when they ask for help and have empathy for them. We need to keep in mind that parents are coming into the IEP process just trying to get support for their child, not deliberating trying to have contentious interactions. This section begins with

what parent participants describe as their confusion with special education systems and structures, their frustration with bureaucratic systems and unsupportive staff, examples of ways they navigated disagreements with the district, how district staff hold onto power in meetings which dehumanizes parents. In the second subtheme, parent participants share examples of their advocacy and activism for dis/abled students.

### *Toxic Interactions and Power Imbalance*

All of the parents I spoke with expressed frustration about the complicated structures in special education and how the school district that made it difficult for them to ask for help. Their experiences highlight the complex situations that parents have to navigate, oftentimes without any guidance and support, which leads to them finding support from other parents or community organizations. Parents discuss the toxic interactions they have with school staff, with the special education department, and urge educators to restructure IEP meetings so that power can be shared more equally in that space with parents.

Angela provided many suggestions for how special education staff can better work with families. At the beginning of every IEP meetings, parents are handed the 14-page procedural safeguards which outlines their rights as a parent. Angela said that packet is too complicated and intimidating for parents. Angela said she "is an intelligent person, has a college degree, spent time studying [special education law by herself], had an advocate with [her], but [she] still struggled with [understanding her rights] (Angela, personal communication, 2/13/2020). In addition, Angela said that district staff need to be more mindful of how to make parents feel more comfortable and included in the discussion during IEP meetings. She said that parents can feel intimidated as the only family member at the meeting. Angela said:

> The power structure [in IEP meetings] is way off. You have a parent there, they're worried about their kid, they're scared about what's happening. They don't know what's to come. There are all kinds of legalities… we're not lawyers. Here's the district, sitting down at the first IEP meeting, there's the general education teacher, principal, all the therapists, people who did the testing, and then me. [Staff] really need to understand the power structure. I've had parents [talk to me and said] English isn't their first language and they didn't know they could have a translator at the meeting. The parents shouldn't have to figure that out (Angela, personal communication, 2/13/2020).

Angela points out two major issues in her quote above. The first thing she says is that parents are unaware of their rights and staff do not take the time to explain to them their procedural safeguards. The second issue she mentioned is that it can be intimidating for parents to sit at the table with school staff. Added on top of that, we have many families who speak languages other than English. Personally, I have been in many IEP meetings where the school does not even request for an interpreter, so the parents are truly not given the opportunity to participate in the discussion. Educators like myself are busy, attend multiple meetings a day on top of having to teach and complete a mountain of paperwork. We need to remember the human aspects of the job as well, which includes giving parents the space to ask questions, and making sure we are fully including them in the discussion and planning of their child's IEP.

Ms. Brown also offers suggestions for educators. She said that staff need to take the time to listen to what parents are saying and have more empathy for parents. Ms. Brown said staff should:

> Just listen and ask more questions. What are the parents really asking? The parent claim might be false, it might not be exactly true but what's going on in their perception of the

> event? What's their fear we're not addressing? What's their concern that we're missing? They may not be asking or saying it in the right way. How can we provide support? I think it's not so much on the parent's side but on the school side. All of us parents and staff need more empathy for each other. More empathy and mutual goodwill. [We know that] teachers and sped staff are here to help students and parents are doing their best to help their kids [too]. When things go south, we start assuming, we don't assume best intentions, we assume that sped staff is [in their office] plotting how to torture children and families and you know parents are just figuring out how they can make the system work for their own individual child. I mean those narratives live (Ms. Brown, personal communication, 2/13/2020).

Ms. Brown's statement is powerful and points out the structural inequalities in special education that focuses on processes, paperwork, and encourages teachers to be fearful lawsuits from families. Simple things like listening, asking questions, and assuming best intentions are powerful tools educators like myself need to remember when working with parents. Admittedly, I have always been afraid of heated discussions and contentions meetings with vocal parents. Generally, these vocal parents are white, have financial resources, are well-informed and come to our meetings with advocates and attorneys. In these meetings, we are asked to justify our educational plans, they poke holes in our arguments, and they may request for additional resources for their children. District staff prepare for meetings with well-resourced families by spending ample time prior to the meeting preparing how to respond. Families of color can also be vocal and challenge our recommendations. However, district staff are less likely to take their frustrations seriously if they are not coming in with knowledge about their rights or about the IEP process. As a content specialist, most of the meetings I attend on behalf of the district are

with discontented families. Last year, our district asked us all to partake in a two-day training on customer service strategies, which are examples of a kind of neoliberal education reform rooted in business models (Giroux, 2004). Learning about our district's new H.U.G. (Honor Understand Guide) standards seemed silly at the time, however, considering what Angela and Ms. Brown are saying, that training was important. As the parent participants described, educators like myself lack skills in listening, empathizing, responding, and respecting our student's families.

When speaking about her dis/abled nephew's experience in school, Ella also expressed frustration that school staff did not notice when he was asking for help. Moreover, when staff finally recognized that he was having symptoms of a mental health crisis, they did not alert anyone in the family. Ella's sister did not want to file a lawsuit, she "just wanted an apology [from the school district], and eventually she got that. She wanted her son to graduate from high school, which he did" (Ella, personal communication, 2/26/2020).

Family members like Ella's said they are not looking for much, just the school staff to do their job and loop in the families when things are not going well. Ella's sister was not looking to file a lawsuit, she just wanted an apology. Similarly, Angela discussed her desire to trust district staff, however, experienced situations that led her to believe that staff were being deceptive. Angela felt the urgency to begin IEP services for her son but felt like school staff were not treating them seriously. Instead of being invited to an IEP meeting to discuss the assessment results with the entire team, the school psychologist suggested meeting individually with the parent. Angela had friends who went through the assessment process so she knew to ask for an IEP meeting to discuss the assessment data and her rights to invite outside individuals to the meeting. As it relates to feeling defensive, Angela said:

> How the whole thing came down put me in a place of feeling defensive because of them going well you didn't submit your request properly. The whole beginning had all of these, almost like little administrative crap. Oh, you're not checking the boxes exactly how they should be therefore we're not going to allow this to go through. As a parent, I'm walking into this, I don't know what all the boxes are. All I know is that my kid is failing. He's hurting and he doesn't want to go to school. My child is not your guinea pig. Nobody was listening and they kept contradicting each other. Parents… want to trust you guys to know how to educate their child, they don't know what to ask for (Angela, personal communication, 2/13/2020).

As it relates to advocating for their child, speaking up, getting involved, Angela said:

> Parents come into this and don't know how much say they have. They're trusting the school district. I feel like [the school district] should have an extra obligation to make that process easy and clear. Not you sent the email to the wrong place, therefore we're stopping the whole process. The parent is asking for help. We should do everything we can, as the district, to help this parent. I would like to see the district more willing to listen to what parents are telling them (Angela, personal communication, 2/13/2020).

During her interview, Michelle, who is a parent of two and a content specialist, described lessons she learned about what parents need and how to best work with families. Michelle said that parents just want to be recognized as adults independent of their children, instead of only being referred to as mom or dad. In essence, parents want to be humanized by school staff as adults who are intelligent and able to comprehend and participate in discussions about school policies and practices that affect their children. Michelle said:

> [One parent told me] she was going to her son's IEP… and they kept calling her mom and I do that all the time. She was like I have a name. I didn't even register that because I walk into IEPs all the time, I've never met the kid, never met the family, and I know hopefully I can identify who's the parent and I'll [call them] mom, dad, and it seems perfectly normal (Michelle, personal communication, 2/21/2020).

To better support families and communities, Michelle discusses the importance of knowing student cultures and building trust with families. Michelle said:

> If you can build trust with the family, you can really be an advocate for them but once trust is broken, you have to actively seek to build it again. Otherwise, it kind of festers and then [the student goes] through middle to high school and that team doesn't have a relationship with the family but they're already distrustful going forward. When that relationship is broken, it's definitely not about the student and that's not good. Trying to build alliances is worth every effort that we have and I don't think we have great training for that (Michelle, personal communication, 2/21/2020).

Elaborating on building alliances with parents, Michelle says that having folx of color on staff who are racially similar to the parents attend the meeting can make a large impact. Even if that person does not work directly with their child, being able to connect culturally or racially on a deeper level at the meeting can help the parents feel more at ease and not alone. As a person of color and Asian American teacher, I have also heard that my presence at an IEP meeting has been welcomed by parents/families of color. Usually in IEP meetings with school staff, everyone at the table is white, which can be intimidating for parents/families of color. When I know a family speaks Chinese, I am able to speak to them in a language they are comfortable with and hopefully position myself as an advocate for their child and someone they can trust.

Michelle said:

> I was working at [this school] and they had a really tough beginning of the year and so the vice principal is a white male and the majority of the staff were white and all the students were of color. [The] one trusted person [for the family] was coach, who is African American staff member, but not [the student's] main teacher. He's the coach at the school and supports this class. I think getting other people from the community, making sure to ask the parents, who else would you like to be in the meeting, who is going to support you? That's something we skip a lot I think that they really appreciate when more than one person [they're comfortable with] are there (Michelle, personal communication, 2/21/2020).

Michelle describes action steps all educators should keep in mind to address parent concerns about building trust, being acknowledged as humans, and the importance of having a balanced IEP team which includes someone the parents can trust.

Unfortunately, Ms. Brown had several more examples of working with unsupportive and challenging staff members through the years. She said:

> There was a lot that was put in [his IEP] that was really tier one [intervention]. He has an accommodation to this day that he can wear a hat, like how stupid is that, that we have to take up space in an IEP for that? But for him it's an accommodation because [it helps him] filter out the world [so he can focus]. But people are stuck on well there's no hats allowed in my class. [Some teachers] have said he can't get his accommodations in their class and that's illegal. [Also, my son has a nut allergy] which is life threatening and his math teacher said that didn't work for her because she likes to eat pistachios on her break and then throw the shells out on the floor. So, [she said that] he should just not be in her class

> and she didn't tell him, she emailed that to me. She didn't want my son in her class because of his allergy. [I told the principal about this] and he was livid (Ms. Brown, personal communication, 2/13/2020).

The teachers Ms. Brown discussed above remind me of what Lalvani et al. (2015) described as the dysconsciousness many teachers have, in which they have limited or distorted understandings of the inequalities in our students' lives. The wallpaper in our daily lives are the exclusionary practices/structures in schools become invisible to the point that teachers opening disagree with and oppose providing accommodations to students. Ms. Brown recounted another experience where her son's teacher excluded him from a class fieldtrip. She said:

> The situation was extremely toxic. There was one school field trip where [he couldn't] take MUNI[8] because it's too overwhelming for him to be on the bus. Like the whole MUNI thing, traveling with 66 other fifth graders, and then to go to a big field trip all day [long would be too much for him], so I said I will drive him and we'll meet you there. The teacher said no, you can't do that. I said no, we're doing that and so I dropped him off [at the field trip]. [When we got there], the teacher was looming above him, standing like this looking down at him screaming at him in front of… all the kids and all the other parent chaperons. [The teacher asked me] what are you doing here today? I told you, you were not allowed to come. It was awful. So, I went in and I'm very feisty for a small person and I told her… he has a right to be on this field trip. Yeah, we're going and I said, you better go get my tickets, because we're going to the museum [with you all]. So, because [his teacher] was not going to give me [the tickets], the principal had to go and get tickets from the teacher. [My son] wasn't really aware of all that happened. I was… so

[8] MUNI is a part of San Francisco's Municipal Transportation Agency and refers to the city's public transportation network of busses and trains.

> upset. Everywhere we went [in the museum], [the teacher would say] they're not with us (Ms. Brown, personal communication, 3/5/2020).

The two examples Ms. Brown shares above shed light on the type of treatment students and parents have to endure when teachers are not understanding or accommodating for their diverse populations. Ms. Brown highlights in her first statement how unfortunate it is to have to include simple accommodations in her son's IEP, just to protect him from teachers who could otherwise disagree with him wearing a hat in class. Ms. Browns' second example shows the blatant discrimination that teacher had towards her son by not allowing him to participate in a class fieldtrip. At that time in her son's education, Ms. Brown said that there had already been so many negative interactions and the school was trying to exit him from special education, had already called him lazy to his face, and blamed Ms. Brown for poor parenting.

To summarize, parents of dis/abled children have to navigate complicated bureaucratic structures while oftentimes not fully understanding their rights, special education laws, and complex processes and procedures. Parents want to be humanized, not just thought of and referred to as mom or dad. Parents want to trust the school but dishonest or deceptive situations come up that breaks their trust. In addition to contentious meetings or disagreements that can arise with the school district, parents also shared situations that they are discriminatory, such as their children not having their IEP implemented and being excluded from class fieldtrips. The next subtheme will describe ways parent participants engaged in activism and advocacy for dis/abled youth.

### *Parent Advocacy and Activism*

The parent participants I spoke with are all strong advocates for their children in their own ways. They engaged in activism and spoke up due to the violent treatment of students and

the school district's continued disregard for parent participation and input. Due to their experiences working against school staff, they have found it necessary to take on these additional tasks. The parent participants described being involved school Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), participated in community organizations, educated themselves on special education laws, and organized themselves in order to have a louder collective voice. This section lays out ways the parents interviewed advocate and engage in activism for dis/abled youth. Their actions align with DisCrit's tenant which supports activism and all forms of resistance as important aspects of activism-scholarship.

When Grace's daughter was struggling with her mental health and not being supported in school, Grace researched all the schools in the district and applied for transfers multiple times in hopes of finding a more fitting school community. Changing school settings ultimately helped her daughter get assessed and qualify for an IEP, though none of the school settings were able to support her unique needs. As for Angela, she began advocating for her son early on. She was the "president of the PTA at his school [as well as helped] out in the classroom" (Angela, personal communication, 2/13/2020). When Angela's son began struggling in fifth grade, she advocated for meetings early on, had him privately assessed, and recruited support from special education advocates. Angela said:

> I was able to have…my resources outside of the district and have him assessed [privately]. The assessment I came back with [was different from the district's assessment]. The assessment [from the school district said he] just had some ADHD and he's just a little hyper and we don't need to do much. I was grateful to know enough to go to an outside source that I knew the district couldn't dispute. [When discussing what supports my son needed in class, people on the IEP team] kept contradicting each other. I finally slammed

> my hands down and said you're all contradicting each other, so what is it? Finally, our content person signed off for an NPS. It was the last week of school, seventh grade and then I had to scramble. Scramble for a placement for him because it was so late in the school year. [We had to check so many schools] because none of them were appropriate for him. I went and looked at the first school and said absolutely not, you're not putting my kid in a school that's not going to give him a diploma, which is another thing parents don't understand that I am trying to advocate for. I have a kid with an IQ off the charts and you're going to put him [at a school] where he won't have a diploma to go to university? (Angela, personal communication, 2/13/2020).

Both Grace and Angela understood that their child's school placement was not working, and took it upon themselves to conduct detailed research and find a more fitting school. Angela describes her frustration with school staff who could not come to an agreement, having to remind them why they need to be more urgent in finding an appropriate school placement, and her scrambling to find a school placement as to not waste time. This is a common theme for many families, since getting placed into a non-public school can sometimes takes upwards of a year, during which time the student is not receiving any support and services.

As it relates to why she let me interview her, Angela said: "any place I have a chance to say what we can do to improve this [I do it] because these things will improve for so many children. That's why we're here, we want to help kids, that's the whole point" (Angela, personal communication, 2/13/2020). As a part of her advocacy, Angela volunteers her own time as an officer in the district's community advisory council (CAC) for students with dis/abilities and other activities that come up, such as my call for parent participants for this study. Relating to who she was grateful to have supporting her family, Angela said:

> I'm grateful that [the special education advocacy organization] took our case… we're not a wealthy family and that's part of why I do what I do. I had an advocate there who knew the system so I trusted her, I relied on her a lot. She said Angela do this, I did it because I had somebody on my side who was looking out for my son. Luckily everyone on the Community Advisory Council (CAC) knew… I was the new kid on the block [and they helped me. They are [just] helping parents through it (Angela, personal communication, 2/13/2020).

Angela's family, like many other families of children with dis/abilities, support one another. The local non-profit organization Angela speaks of is led by parents of dis/abled children. These parents volunteer to work in the office, offer supports to parents in many languages, hold events to educate parents on what it means to have an IEP, and helps parents network with other families. Although folx in my department gripe about this group of involved families since they are highly vocal and question everything our department does, Angela highlights the importance for families to receive support when they are not getting it from the schools.

Next, Ms. Brown also shared more examples of her advocacy through the years, from being an active parent at her son's schools and participating in research reports and litigations for dis/abled students. In supporting inclusive practices for dis/abled students on a larger level, Ms. Brown said:

> It was probably around 2010. We were part of the families that provided feedback and comments [on the Urban Collaborative report], which came out with significant [suggestions] but it was yet another unfunded mandate. [Then, there was] a lawsuit against the school district [filed by parents] saying you can't segregate students with disabilities. [At that time], if you were hard-of-hearing and you wanted to go to your

> feeder school, [you couldn't] because you had to go to [one specific school because they had the hard-of-hearing program]. There was no parent choice and the district was sued. [As a result, the district] had to say you can go anywhere, no more of this you can only go there. [In the past, parents] didn't really have the option [to say yes or no to a school placement] (Ms. Brown, personal communication, 3/15/2020).

As Ms. Brown describes, many of the changes that for students occur due to pressure and lawsuits led by parents, such as the one that resulted in our district's school lottery system. The lottery system is controversial, since it has been proven to segregate students racially over the years, however, there is merit in what she is saying about giving students access to more schools and not limiting them to only certain ones. Ms. Brown's son now attends an arts-focused high school in the district and she continues her advocacy work there. Ms. Brown said:

> We have an inclusive parents' group [there]. It was hard to start three years ago but last month, we did a survey of all the teachers of how they provide IEP accommodations within the arts. [Some teachers said they] just follow the students lead or the parents lead, some people said I don't know what to do. It's really hard to figure out right? I mean it's easy when you're figuring out how to [provide accommodations when we're writing] a paragraph, it's harder when it's how do I provide accommodations when you're singing an opera. We had this really rich conversation [among the parents to see what] we do to make it more inclusive. The inclusion parents group found that working together as a group, we have a much stronger voice. Kids used to have to write an essay [over the summer] which was MLA format and proper everything and it was worth a third of their grade [without support]. We pushed back and changed that process completely. [We want to make sure their] summer homework assignments will include some scaffolds. This

> could be helpful with all students. It's really looking at universal design (Ms. Brown, personal communication, 3/15/2020).

Knowing the school that Ms. Brown is speaking about, it is a competitive school to get into with a very conservative and traditional approach to schooling. Students who are admitted need to balance rigorous classes on top of their full arts schedule. Ms. Brown's involvement with the parent group is not focused on just supports for students with IEPs, but giving all students supports, especially during the summers when not all families may have the ability to help their children with difficult school assignments. Her comments remind me that some teachers, especially at the more traditional schools, continue to assume that student's with dis/abilities need to be challenged and can overcome their learning differences through harder work, which is not the case. While parents want to advocate for their children, they may not be familiar with special education laws and IEP meetings. Ms. Brown described having to stay up late at night to research special education laws, IEP paperwork, assessment processes, and being self-taught in special education laws. Ms. Brown has also attended IEP meetings to support other parents. Helping her friend at their child's IEP meeting, Ms. Brown said:

> Her kid had some pretty serious mental health [issues]... he tried to commit suicide. They actually extracted him, [the] parents did and placed [him in] residential treatment. ….one of those middle of the night extractions. So, then we had to go back and retroactively do the IEP after. It's suicide, nobody expects it right? [His IEP] didn't address all of those [concerns] and there were all sorts of other complicated issues around it. So, she hadn't submitted a unilateral placement letter and I think at that point I didn't know [about having to submit the letter], so I remember like okay, let's google that right now what ... oh we need to go do this (Ms. Brown, personal communication, 3/15/2020).

Ms. Brown always encourages parents to be advocates for their children. She said that:

> Advocate is not a bad word and it gets used as a bad word sometimes. I talk to parents about not being afraid and encouraging them to be advocates. They're afraid to advocate because in most folks the narrative is that means you're fighting right? You're in a disagreement but… you know, advocating is asking for help. Asking for help for your child is okay. They need to know that (Ms. Brown, personal communication, 3/15/2020).

Ms. Brown has taken on an official role with the school district to be a liaison and bridge communication between parents and staff. As a district staff member and parent of a student with an IEP, she has to support both parents and staff in her role, and her comment above about destigmatizing the word advocate is interesting. When teachers think about parents who advocate, they think about parents who complain and will do anything to get what they want, however, Ms. Brown reminds educators that parents who advocate are just asking for help. Even though Ms. Brown and I work in the same department, we had not previously talked much. Through our interview, I developed a deep respect for her commitment to students with dis/abilities and was impressed with all that she has done for this community, such as work with law suits, the non-profile community organization, and her parent advocacy work at her son's schools. Ms. Brown is able to talk to parents and staff from the perspective of a parent who has a child with an IEP, in ways that are not far-removed but personal. For Ms. Brown, this work is personal.

In summary, this section described the kinds of toxic interactions that parent participants have had with school staff. Parents of dis/abled students attend meetings where they feel overwhelmed, alone, and unsure. The parent participants go into the IEP process wanting to trust school staff but difficult interactions result in them feeling deceived or wary of teachers and administrators. Educators like myself put parent in precarious situations, where we ask them to

trust our professional opinions, and consent to legal IEP documents, even if we have not spent the time building that trust with them or even asking them for their input. The second theme was able to answer research questions two and three by describing the kinds of disregard, toxic interactions, and ways parents engage in activism and advocacy. The experiences parent participants describe clearly show that we are doing a poor job of hearing their voices and that we are creating meeting spaces that inappropriately shifts the balance of power in the school's favor. Additionally, educators like myself need to honor and respect parent advocacy. Grace, Angela, and Ms. Brown have all advocated for their children or for dis/abled students on a larger level. They leveraged information and options they had available to them, tapped into their network and community organizations to receive additional support, and also formed parent advocacy groups in order to have a louder voice as a collective. The next section, I will include information from teacher and content specialist participants on their perspectives on how our school district and within our own actions exemplify a continued disinvestment in dis/abled students and their families.

**Theme 3: Disinvestment in Students and Families**

In this section, teacher, content specialist, and I describe all the ways that our school district continues to disinvest in our students and families. Our schools have been structured in ways to keep staff busy with the enforcement of normalcy (Lalvani, 2014) and with pedagogies of pathologizations (Annamma, 2017). Our school district continues to staff our highest needs classrooms the least trained teachers, promotes use of physical restraints, which are two examples of how we have disinvested in these students and parents. The information presented in this section corroborates the ways parents and students continue to experience violence and dehumanization by educators and schools. Despite wanting to promote universal design for

learning (UDL) strategies and inclusion of dis/abled students, educators like myself face many challenges in our roles, which is no excuse for why we are reproducing inequalities for dis/abled students and their families. The first subtheme of this section discusses the lack of training for teachers in certain areas and the emphasis of certain knowledge by the district in other areas, shedding light on the priorities of the district. The second subtheme includes perspectives from teachers and content specialist participants on necessary districtwide changes and includes my reflections for a professional development I attended.

### *"The School was not Adequately Trained"*

During my interviews with teachers and content specialists, I asked each of the participants why they believe dis/abled students continue to be disproportionately referred into segregated classroom settings and how they are addressing these issues in their roles. They were able to describe small things they do in their day-to-day to reaffirm student identities and instances in which they are able to have candid discussions about inclusion with colleagues. What was more resounding in these conversations were the things they are unable to do and how they as district staff members lack the training in order to address these issues. All the participants shared similar struggles. Despite wanting to help students be successful in the general education setting, they continue to encounter roadblocks such staffing shortages, inadequate training for staff, lack of professional development, and a focus on the enforcement of normalcy in schools (Lalvani, 2014). The title of this section is a quote from Ella who describes her nephew's school staff not being able to help him when he was having a mental health crisis and summarizes what teachers and content specialists describe as the systemic disinvestment of dis/abled students in schools.

As it relates to not having adequately trained staff, Michelle said that students with the most needs oftentimes have the least trained teachers, such as the students in our SOAR (Success Opportunity Achievement Resilience) program for students with emotional or behavioral dis/abilities. In SOAR classrooms, Michelle said:

> They are good teachers but [we're] building the plane while [we're] flying it. We can really get strong programs that help students go back to general ed, instead of like leveraging to go into non-public [schools] (Michelle, personal communication, 2/21/2020).

Michelle is describing an issue not unique to our school district with finding qualified staff and preventing teacher turnover. In our district, most of the turnover occurs in the special education classrooms with our highest need students. Instead of offering incentives for experienced teachers to take these jobs and providing extra support and resources, our district has resorted to creating a teacher internship program. This district pathway program recruits brand-new teachers, trains them for four-weeks during the summer before throwing them into classrooms. Our most restrictive classrooms should be the hard stop where students get the support they need and eventually transition back into the general education setting, however, as a result of having inadequately trained teachers, most of the students who are funneled into our SOAR (Success Opportunity Achievement Resilience) program or into our special day classes (SDCs) continue to struggle and are then referred into non-public schools.

Along the same lines, as a content specialist, Alexandria mentioned our teachers and para-professionals do not have sufficient training to implement our students' behavior intervention plans (BIPs). Our classroom staff are asked to manage student behaviors but have

little to no training. Safety Care[9] trainings book up quickly so staff have little understanding of how to actually implement the strategies in the student plans, which results in many of our staff using verbal de-escalation strategies and physical restraints inappropriately. Physical restraining a student is highly traumatizing but approved by the district to use to prevent a student from harming themselves or others, however, in many cases, our staff are misjudging situations and unjustifiably physically violent with students. Instead of focusing on behavior management strategies or behavior intervention plans, what if our school district shifts the conversation to humanizing student voices, listening and caring for students, responding to their needs in non-violent ways, and stop trying to regulate their bodies and voices?

Speaking from her experience as an aunt and family member of a student labeled as dis/abled, Ella said that school administrators need more training for students with mental health needs. Ella said: "the school was not adequately trained, that principal was not trained in terms of how-to response appropriately. [When my nephew was in crisis, the principal just didn't know what to do" (Ella, personal communication, 2/26/2020). In this instance, Ella believed that as the person in charge of the school, the school administrator needed more knowledge about how to intervene during a student mental health crisis. Although this principal called the child crisis hotline during this incident, Ella said the call was not for help and nobody followed up with the family, which resulted in her nephew escalating even further and the district offering a residential placement.

Next, thinking about the classroom teacher perspective, Dolores described during her interview why teachers need better training on special education and on not related to core curriculum. Dolores shared:

[9] Safety Care is the name of the crisis prevention program that our district utilizes to train staff on responding to and managing behavior. The two-day training for staff occurs monthly and provides includes training on verbal and physical de-escalation. The physical de-escalation training includes use of physical restraints.

> We need to take a step back and think of how to support these students and their families in a different way. We're never going to fix our test scores if we don't help with that first, which results I think to behavior issues. [Also], if the ultimate goal is to continue to have mainstream students with RSP support, it would be really helpful to have more support from social workers with social emotional curriculum, [or] like having a SOAR teacher [help us]. SPED is kind of just a world that I don't know… I want it to be more transparent and exactly how the process works, because it feels like almost every one of my students could benefit from more support. Also, there are so many different acronyms, my students are all unique in themselves, so I know one student can fit into this IEP and another student might have like the ED attached to it, another student might have like the health concern attached to it (Dolores, personal communication, 5/13/2020).

Dolores was candid during her interview we about her lack of experience with special education but she points out powerful points in the quote above. She said that many schools focus on test scores and behavior management when the focus should be on supporting students and families in different way and incorporating social emotional curriculum into the school day. Dolores discussed her confusion with special education eligibilities, why certain students fit into boxes, and wanting more transparency about special education processes in general. In addition to parents describing that they are not included in the discussion, it seems as though general education teachers may also feel similarly.

In this section, teachers and content describe the amount of work they are asked to do without adequate training, the kinds of professional development school staff need, and how schools continue to focus on test scores and policing student bodies instead of on their humanity. While teachers do need more support and training, the larger issues that came up suggest that the

school district continues to not care about outcomes and experiences for dis/abled students. Michelle summarized it well, that for students in our highest need's programs, staff are building the plane while they're flying it, pointing to the fact that there is huge disregard for our special education segregated classrooms and they have become gateways for students to funnel into non-public schools. As a district employee, Michelle's comment struck a chord with me. What does it say about a school district that hires and staffs these classrooms with the most inexperienced teachers? Why do we continue to support using physical restraint? The next subtheme continues with ways the school district continues to disinvest and not value dis/abled students. Teacher and content specialist interviewed provide their suggestions and perspectives on changes that need to happen in the department and districtwide in order to properly address issues of disproportionality.

### *Perspectives on Districtwide Changes*

Our school district does not advocate full inclusion of dis/abled students. This is evident since special education programs are only in certain school sites and our district continues to create and funnel students into segregated classrooms. In addition, the special education department that I work for operates in highly traditional ways, does not communicate or seek advice from outside departments, is not clear about standards for why students should be moved into more restrictive settings. These types of issues perpetuate the discrimination of students of color and students who we label as dis/abled. The parents, teachers, and content specialist who I interviewed describe the changes that our department and school district should consider if our goal is to foster more inclusion of dis/abled students and prevent more students from moving into segregated settings.

Ms. Brown discussed during her interview that inclusion of dis/abled students is important but unfortunately, not every school or educator shares this priority. Ms. Brown said that while the district has improved in creating different classes and programs in their schools, certain programs are still located in only a handful of school sites. Ms. Brown said some schools were previously "designated as special ed schools, so all the supports and trained staff were at those school [and] these great programs… are embedded within their whole community" (Ms. Brown, personal communication, 2/13/2020). What Ms. Brown points out is that even now, schools are able to reject students from enrolling if their site does not have a certain special education program. Students can still be rejected placement based on the services listed in their IEPs, which leads to further segregation of students based on ability. Similarly, Ramona and Ruth both discussed in our interview the need for more fluidity of programs at schools, sharing of resources, and teachers working together to support students, instead of strict divisions of programs and staff. Ruth said:

> [Some teachers think] you're going to take all the SDC kids, you're in your own SDC world and I'm in my RSP world. [We should] work as a team more. [We should see them as programs and services available for the entire] school, instead of you qualify [for this program/class]. I think my dream is that every kid should be primarily a general ed student. Every kid starts their day with their morning circle with their general ed peers. It's like you have to ask the [general education] teacher for a favor, like do you mind if [these students] joins your class and that shouldn't be the case. (Ruth, personal communication, 2/7/2020).

Ruth describes many schools delineating between classrooms and programs and teachers rarely collaborate and create differentiated groups together. The reality is what Ruth said, special

education teachers have to beg for their students to be included, because the standard is for them to be excluded. Inclusion is an uphill batter for most of our parents and special educators, which is the case when our district as a whole continues to sort students based on ability and reinforcing that dis/abilities are innate in a student so they need to learn in a different environment. Furthermore, Ramona mentioned the need for more consistent definitions and understanding of our special day classes and use of increased interventions before referring a student out of the general education setting. Ramona said:

> Teachers do not understand an SDC because they have not seen it before and they just think it's better than [the GE class]. [We need to] maximize [all the interventions available] at the school site first. Are there other supports that aren't necessarily special ed, like social work or counseling, mentors? If it's a behavioral concern and not academic, I try to push back and say behavior is not the reason to change placements and really our SDCs should be for those students who have learning disabilities and need a different pace of learning. Our mild-moderate classes are so chaotic because the behaviors are so high, [but it should be for] kids who need more reading instruction (Ramona, personal communication, 2/7/2020).

Ramona's comment above describes that our continuum of classes has vague definitions and most of the time, students are sent into special day classes due to behavior. Being in a large district should not be an excuse for the lack of communication and streamlining of protocols, we need to be firm about why students are moved into separate settings, otherwise students will continue to be moved for behavior or simply because a teacher wants them out.

On top of inclusion of dis/abled students not being a priority in the district and staff having different definition of special education programs, Michelle adds her thoughts about the

problems with the special education department. When I asked her what our department needs to change, she said that we work in very old school department and that it has become accepted for us to not communicate with other departments. Michelle said: "What would be sensical would be to take down the wall of special ed, just education. Since we're siloed, it allows people to say that's not my problem, like hot potato (Michelle, personal communication, 2/21/2020). This issue point to larger districtwide problems, when district staff are able to relegate responsibilities to others. I completely agree with Michelle's statement. Rarely do we work with other departments in the district. When a student has an IEP, our department is expected to deal with any issues that come up. There are folx in the district working on anti-racist pedagogies, social-emotional learning, culturally relevant and rigorous curriculum planning, and there is so much potential for us to be in communication with them and adopting what they are doing into our work, yet we are not.

In terms of the work we are doing within the department to address disproportionality, Ramona and Ruth said that there are meetings and professional developments set aside for these discussions but rarely is there context provided, no group goal-orientation, or time to have meaningful dialogue. Ramona said that these professional developments happen rarely and not all central office staff are present. The staff who attend are visibly not invested because of the way the information is presented is as another task to complete, not as a way to shift outcomes for students. On February 20, 2020, I attended one such professional development led by our department for the district and community members, focusing on our district's performance indicator review (PIR) and comprehensive coordinated early intervening services (CCEIS). The purpose of this meeting was explicitly named as how we are as a district addressing disproportionality of students in special education, so I was excited to attend for the first time.

For our district, we failed to have enough students participate in the statewide English and math assessments, our district suspension rates were too high for African American students, and we had significant disproportionality of African American students labeled as Emotionally Disturbed (ED), Other Health Impairment (OHI), and with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD). Since our district continued to be flagged for these areas of disproportionality, we are required by the state to have this meeting annually. District staff and parents were invited to the meeting to review the plan that was created and have a discussion. I participated in this meeting in my role as content specialist and will include my reflections for this research project.

In addition to staff from the special education department, people from the superintendent's office, pupil services, curriculum and instruction, and parent and community members were in attendance. Most of the presenters were white, with the exception of our consultant who is black. Most of the participants were white, with the exception of a small group of African American educators who all sat together. They, along with parents in the room, were the most vocal during the meeting. During the presentation, these folx asked questions about the efficacy of the proposed action steps, asked the presenters how they arrived at their reasoning, and expressed concerns about our district continuing to fail to address the needs of our dis/abled students.

The facilitator said many times that they wanted our help, encouraged discussion, and thanked us for being present. Since next steps and ways to address the problems was pre-generated, many participants in my small group felt uncertain if our feedback would be included. For some participants, this meeting felt like checking a box instead of actually including additional perspectives. One of the parent participants mentioned that parents are burnt out from all the time and energy they were spending coming to these types of meetings and expressed

frustration that have not seen improvements for students. The presenter was dismissive and said that parents are an important part of the solution have always been included in these conversations.

The meeting focused heavily on reducing the identification and discipline of African-American students. Our department believes this is happening because of implicit bias, microaggressions, and white supremacy. To address it, we proposed coordinated district-wide interventions such as diversity training for all our students, additional training for general education teachers, and plan to hold more student focus groups. We also included early intervention strategies in the district-wide plan but many of the theories of action listed such as teaching students cultural competence skills and about anti-racism were vague. This part of the presentation garnered the most feedback, since the proposals were so unclear. How were we as a district planning to implement these skills in both staff and students? The presenters did not have an answer for us. Towards the end of the session, participants started leaving, many of the conversation did not have an ending, and it was unclear what the next steps would be. While I was excited to attend, within the first 15 minutes it was clear that the problems and solutions were pre-drafted and I felt disheartened that presenters did not really want our input. This meeting had so much potential yet I felt like we missed the mark.

In summary, the third theme aimed to answer research questions two and three relating to the kinds of violence our students and their families experience in schools. In our large school district, schools and departments work in silos, which creates inconsistent processes and miscommunication. Working separately also allows for individuals to shift the blame to others. In addition, our district continues to not prioritize trainings for teachers and staff that will make the largest impact for our students, namely trainings for teachers in our most restrictive

classrooms and behavioral interventions. Instead of asking teachers to police student behavior, what if our district adopts humanizing, culturally relevant responsive, and inclusive practices instead? To invest in our students and families, our district should bring to the surface our student's cultural, linguistic, and historical lived experiences and include them in their IEPs, rather than glossing over that part of their assessment reports. Our district continues to be flagged as being disproportionate, year after year, and as a result of that, more paperwork and hollow meetings are scheduled. As a content specialist, we are asked to complete self-studies, review student IEPs, and check off boxes of what we are doing well and not well. When our department holds meetings to address disproportionality of our African American and Latinx students, instead of having meetings with surface-level discussions, we should include the voices of the students, families, and communities that are affected. We need to acknowledge the ever-present whiteness in special education, and how the racist and ableist mindsets that we as educators hold contribute to the problem. How do we talk about the problem in a way that is centering the voices of our dis/abled students, and come up with actual concrete action items that will lead to transformative change for our students?

Next, in the fourth and final theme, teachers, content specialists, and parents discuss how they have been able to support students with understanding their dis/ability label, ways they create a strong connection to teacher and schools, which can result in students and families feeling like they belong in a school community. When teachers and staff include humanizing practices into their work, they are able to understand and celebrate their student's individual learning needs and prevent them from moving into segregated settings.

## Theme 4: Sense of Belonging and Humanizing Praxis

As a result of building strong connections with students and families and viewing them through a humanizing lens, educators were able to foster inclusive practices, focus on student wellbeing, and help students and families increase their sense of belonging to a school community. While the experiences of dis/abled students are far from ideal, educators shared examples of how they have attempted to shift mindsets about and treatment of dis/abled youth in our schools. At Bayview and Lower Haight elementary school, there is strong leadership, culturally relevant pedagogies and inclusive practices are emphasized, teachers collaborate and include all students, and teachers care for and understand their students deeply. The central theme that weaves all of these experiences together is on student wellbeing, inclusion, and various types of humanizing praxis that can occur in schools when teachers have empathy for students and their families. Teachers and parent participants described how these authentic relationships form and how experiences and outcomes for dis/abled students are impacted when staff spend the time to understand all of their students' strengths and needs inside and outside of the classroom. The first subtheme of this section includes how teachers have been able to shift the focus in their schools towards student wellbeing, which in turn fosters more inclusion for their different learners. The second subtheme reviews the types of humanizing praxis observed in our schools described by teachers and parents.

### *Student Wellbeing and Inclusion*

The teachers that I interviewed from Bayview and Lower Haight elementary schools were proud to describe the diverse supports and kinds of work they have done for their communities. Both schools have good reputations in the district as it relates to how they support their dis/abled students. Amalia, Ella, Dolores, and Shirley discussed the types of supports and

services they have available for their students as well as how their school communities focus on inclusion and diversity.

As a content specialist, Ruth has observed that many of her schools with larger African American populations are staffed by people who are skilled at connecting with students and building trust with their families. She said that is an important skill for all educators, but especially in school communities that experience more trauma and poverty. As an example of that, Ella said that her school- Bayview elementary- has a high African-American student population, has historically always built strong connections with families, resulting in multiple generations of students from the same family attending the school. Ella said:

> Our principal had this knack of being an excellent educator… and had high expectations for the kids. I remember one time I came to her and I [asked] how much money do we have for…the kids in special ed and she said they're all special. She did not bow down to the parents, she didn't have any fear with the parents. She talk to them as if she was their grandmother… [she'd say to the parents] let me tell you what's going to happen to your child if you can't help them with this. She was very old school… and had a knack [for the job] (Ella, personal communication, 2/26/2020).

Ella describes her principal as someone who sees all students as special, not just students with IEPs. This is a powerful and complicated statement and speaks to that person's philosophy on educating all students equally. What is troubling is the principal ignoring and making invisible that some students do have different needs. When I asked Ella to expand what why she thought this principal was a strong leader, she responded that they put in place rigorous differentiated learning groups, did not treat dis/abled students differently, built solid relationships with the parents and community, had genuine care for and acted as a parent figure to the students. Ella

also mentioned that previous administrators at Bayview elementary were all strong black women who were trained by similarly strong black women. I would agree with Ella that her principal sounded like a transformative leader but would trouble their ideas of singular identities and their rejection of the material and psychological impacts of being raced and dis/abled. I have heard firsthand that Bayview elementary is a school with high student needs but like the participants describe, is also a place where there is a rich history of strong community connections, a high bar for learning and instruction, and dedicated faculty and staff. Unlike other schools where tasks and responsibilities are strictly defined, adults at this school all pitch in to support their students.

Similarly, at Lower Haight elementary, Amalia said their principal knows the community well and prior to becoming the school's administrator was a teacher and instructional coach in the same school. Other faculty members have also taught and coached at this school for ten plus years, with one teacher having worked there for 23 years before retiring recently. Both schools as it seems are led by strong leaders who look the students and communities they are serving. This is not to say that all leaders need to come from the same racial and socio-economic backgrounds their students/families but good leaders make it a point to understand their school communities and build those trusting relationships with students and families.

Both Lower Haight and Bayview elementary teachers boasted about the quality and kinds of support staff they have on-site. As it relates to school supports for students, Ella said Bayview elementary school is lucky to have a fulltime social worker and fulltime nurse. Despite their low student enrollment, Bayview elementary prioritizes student support services and continues to fund those positions. Similarly, Amalia and Shirley, who both work at Lower Haight elementary, proudly described the kinds of supports they have at their school. Amalia said:

> So next door we have the family room, and then we have a kitchen and washer dryer, a place for families if they're in transition, if they need a place to hang out during the day. I think that's beautiful. We have a full-time parent liaison that's like very involved and a full-time social worker. You know we have a lot of therapists, but it's just not enough. we have the beginnings to like a lot of great supports (Amalia, personal communication, 2/28/2020).

Shirley adds that they have "a lot of different programs, we're considered a community school. There's a lot of just outreach that happens. The [nearby] church does a lot of community work for the kids like getting them free food" (Shirley, personal communication, 5/25/2020). Lower Haight elementary not only provides educational opportunities for the students but also wrap-around services for them and their families. The school acts as a community hub, retains highly dedicated faculty and staff, provides education and training to further develop their teachers, and is able to foster a sense of unity within the staff.

Moving onto my discussions with teachers about their school communities, teachers describe Bayview and Lower Haight as schools who have dedicated staff who are said to be committed to their students and families. Dolores said that Bayview elementary is a place with supportive colleagues and although they focus heavily on behavior management, they also have a high level of dedication to the students. Dolores said:

> The staff itself is really supportive, unlike any school I've ever worked at. It doesn't feel competitive, it just feels like everybody has each other's back, especially with kind of the culture of the population we work with can sometimes be a lot of behavior issues because there's so much trauma that the students have experienced and a lot of maybe the lack of attention, lack of emphasis on academic learning. So, there is kind of a culture of being

> stricter and having to really know how to get your behavior management down before academic work. Having teachers next to me, especially my partner teacher who was so experienced [at this school] was amazing. She has really helped me and just kind of hanging on her coattails, and she helps me a lot with behavior management and just I've learned a lot from her. The staff itself is nice and small class sizes. … and knowing that my principal fought for more support in our school I think just speaks to how well he is an administrator and how it all trickles down to the students (Dolores, personal communication, 5/14/2020).

Like Ella's comment earlier about her principal being both supportive but very old school, it is complicated to interpreter Dolores' quote in the sense that there are contradictory statements made. In this instance, Dolores mentioned her schools heavy focus on behavior management, which I was surprised to hear. Behavior management is not very student-centered, identity-affirming, or supportive for many students who have dis/abilities. In fact, heavy use of behavior management can lead to the criminalization of and violence against students. However, despite their heavy focus on behavior management, they have small class sizes, teachers are supportive of one another, and there is emphasis on academic rigor and support for student.

Continuing on with school communities, during our interview, I asked Amalia how her school supports different learners. She responded that staff Lower Haight elementary are highly dedicated to the students and "have the same intentions…same goals [and] we really want our students to succeed… everyone is open to working and collaborating (Amalia, personal communication, 2/28/2020). As a resource specialist, Amalia tells the general education teachers who she works with that they will have a co-parenting relationship to support students together. She tells the teachers: "we're working together and figuring it out [together]. Some things may

work or not, it's a journey, we're here to do it together" (Amalia, personal communication, 2/28/2020). In addition, Amalia said their weekly staff meetings focus on instruction, culturally relevant teaching, and during inclusion week, they had a staff-wide discussion about different learning styles. While it was not an in-depth conversation about dis/abilities, Amalia said that it was nice to have time carved out to have that dialogue. Amalia said that staff at her school work well together. This is especially surprising to hear coming from a special education teacher. Typically, special education is relegated to the bungalows and out of sight. In the case of Lower Haight elementary school, general educations teachers at this school, like Shirley who I interviewed, fully embrace collaborating with the special education team. Furthermore, Amalia discussed the types of professional development that her school carves out time for, specifically ones about culturally relevant teaching and about inclusion for dis/abled students. This is not the case for a majority of our schools who rarely if at all bring up these topics to all the staff.

In summary, this subtheme described the kinds of supports, mindsets, and collaboration that happens at Lower Haight and Bayview elementary schools. Teachers at both schools described how they support their students' socio-emotional well-being, such as by having extensive in-school support staff, wrap-around services for the student/families, and folx at the school who would take care of and connect students to services that they need in the community. Especially in communities with less opportunities, strong leadership and teacher support is necessary. In addition, Lower Haight actually focuses on supporting their teachers with understanding and implement culturally relevant teaching practices as well as have buy-in from their general education teachers on inclusion. In the next subtheme I will describe district programs and educator mindsets that teachers, parents, and content specialists said have supported with humanization of dis/abled students and are examples of humanizing praxis.

### *Humanizing Praxis*

Humanizing pedagogy aims to fully develop of a person through critical reflection, is both an individual and collective journey, and is context specific (Freire, 1970). Educators can engage in humanizing praxis by validating a student's identity, reciprocal sharing of perspectives, caring for an individual, and supporting students in engaging in self-reflections. By engaging in group dialogue, educators can support students with understanding oppressive systems and consider how to interrupt and resist these conditions. Schools that focus on students holistically, their needs inside and outside of the school building, are able to increase their sense of belonging and connection to the school community. When schools are able to build these authentic relationships with students, families, and the community, the schools serve as both a place of education and a place where students can feel validated and cared for as individuals. In this section, teacher and parent participants discussed the kinds of school programs and staff mindsets that have interrupted the traditional narratives of dis/abled students. Programs that were mentioned include Positive Behavior Intervention System (PBIS), culturally responsive teaching, and a reading intervention for students who are dyslexic. Teachers and parents interviewed also described the ways they think about, approach, and interact with students that are empathetic, caring, and critical of societal norms. Furthermore, educators and parents discussed how they supported students in culturally relevant ways, how they engaged in discussions with students with their dis/ability labels and how they supported student's socio-emotional and academic needs. By shifting the conversation from a deficit perspective and focusing on the voices of students and the strengths they bring into schools, these pedagogically processes can lead to humanizing praxis[10].

[10] Prior to interviewing participants and collecting data, I was not expecting to uncover examples of humanizing praxis. Since this is a new area that I did not previously discuss, it will be included in the discussion in chapter five.

Although Ms. Brown's son had many dehumanizing and discriminatory experiences in schools, he also had two teachers in particular who were highly supportive. Ms. Brown said:

> One teacher [his teachers] had empathy … and worked to train [other] teachers [on my son's disability]. She struggled because she didn't have a lot of … positional power. She couldn't really get teachers to do what she wanted them to do but she had a lot of empathy for [my son] so that helped tremendously. His first-grade teacher had a special ed background so she also had a lot of empathy for him and advice for me as his mom. [His middle school case manager] came [to our house] the day before school started and met with us for dinner and was like, okay, here's all your teachers and here's where you're going to sit [in your classes]. I told them about your allergies. I told them about your IEP, your yoga ball, your headphones, all of your stuff is already there and loaded, your iPads ready here. I mean it just was incredible (Ms. Brown, personal communication, 2/13/2020).

The two teachers Ms. Brown describes sound empathetic, caring, and took it upon themselves interact with the family in a way that would be supportive and understanding. Although the first teacher Ms. Brown discussed did not have much power to make actual changes, the fact that she was empathetic for her son stood out in their minds. The second teacher Ms. Brown talked about ensured that all his accommodations and supports were in place before the school year started and even went to their house to get to know them and explain how and where he could find his supports in his classes. Not all teachers do these things or are able to do these things, but Ms. Brown's quote highlights how having empathy can go a long way.

The one teacher that I interviewed who I think encapsulates the word empathy is Amalia. Throughout Amalia's interview, it was clear that she knew her students extremely well, she

described in-depth what her students were experiencing outside of school and how they would bring in that baggage into school with them. Furthermore, she is highly empathetic and understanding of systemic issues impacting her students. Empathizing with one of her fourth graders, Amalia said:

> Both [of their] parents passed away, one was killed. The other one died like a year after she was three. She's now being raised by her great grandma who is like in her 90s, and that week her grandma was in the hospital. Of course, she's pouring my coffee on the table and trying to throw my keys out the window. So, I have that lens but I also wonder outside of school, not everyone has this type of lens and can get some of these behaviors. A kid can get into a lot of trouble. Like we had a student on the street and the bus had to come back because he was trying to jump out the window and he wanted to kill himself trying to get the seat belt around his neck. [He was] completely dysregulated and… we got him off the bus but that's also scary seeing a kid who sometimes can be like, he's my superstar today and he did all his work (Amalia, personal communication, 2/28/2020).

Amalia's thoughts and actions above are examples of a type of DisCrit pedagogy that rejects classifying a student based on their behaviors but is rooted in love, understanding, and recognizes a student's resistance as a natural part of existing (Annamma, 2017). Below, Amalia reflected on the experiences and challenges of another one of her students. Amalia explains:

> There were a lot of things…[he] needed [like] housing, and he had been seen panhandling a couple times with his brother. So, he needed housing, he needed food for him and his brother, they would steal a lot… it was just kind of like always trying to figure out like what do you need like what are the physical things you need so you cannot be stealing and stuff. Then in school he had a lot of academic needs. He was only reading

> [at a low level], his brother was slightly different but [the student] was only reading at about Level E or something. In my class… he knew he could always go to… my couch in the room…. if he needed space or time. Sometimes he would take it as far as like he needs to go in the closet because if he felt people were looking at him. That would make him really upset so I told him you know you can choose one, whether it's the closet or the couch. When he would [escalate behaviorally at school, he would] run to my room. I also tried to help him talk through [his thoughts] when he's upset because there were some speech things happening as well (Amalia, personal communication, 2/28/2020).

Amalia's comments sheds light on how she views her students in ways that are understanding of their life circumstances. She does not make excuses for their behavior but instead discusses why they would feel the way they feel or act out in school. Amalia also made it clear during our interview that she was critical of how a dis/ability label can impact a student's identity and self-worth. Even though she's a primary school teacher, she said it is important to have discussions with her students about their dis/ability labels. She said:

> I'm starting to [talk about disabilities] with my older kids. I tell him we're here because we have this thing called dyslexia. You think [what we're doing is] boring but we need to exercise our brain. Also, one mom told me how [me talking to her son about having autism] has been a real awakening for him. [He says] wow, I have autism, that all makes sense, he feels validated. Then I felt so awful that I knew him since second grade… why did I not have that conversation earlier? That's something we don't do in our training, we don't talk about that in school. [In school we learned] how to support [students] but not explain how to have them own [their disabilities [and] navigate the world (Amalia, personal communication, 2/28/2020).

Amalia makes a good point that in teacher education programs, educators are taught to dis/abilities are real and innate differences in our students. We are taught that their deficiencies can be fixed through school's interventions. Discussions about the social constructions of dis/abilities are not discussed in most teacher prep settings. This usually only happens in critical special education or disability studies, unfortunately. For Amalia's student who learned about his autism diagnosis from their discussion, it was reaffirming for him. Although Amalia did not name what she does as critical pedagogy, the way she engages with her students align with what Liasidou (2014) describes as a focus on power, justice, and social transformation for students in subordinate positions. By engaging with students in liberatory thought, Ella supports her with uncovering the deficit model and otherness images that are cast on students with dis/abilities. Similarly, Angela and Ms. Brown also talked during out interviews about how to help validate student identities by having conversations with them early about learning differences and the dis/ability label. They see the value in having open conversations with students about their learning styles. Relating to helping her son understand his dis/ability, Angela said:

> You know, we have a lot of mental health and disability in our family. I've seen it go where there's no discussion and it's led into serious drug and alcohol abuse. For my husband I, that part was hard to figure out how to handle it and really, really challenging as a couple, but in the end, what we really [want]… is [for our son] to know himself and… understand where he's at. That goes up and down. [At one point] he was doing some stuff…where it was like are you trying to pass? Are you trying… to fit in? [He's] still a teenager. We talked a lot about it so that he's informed and he kind of know and he has to advocate for himself (Angela, personal communication, 2/13/2020).

The comment above that surprised me was that Angela's son was trying to pass as neurotypical. Although most teenagers struggle with fitting in at that age, Angela's son was so distraught from being bullied that he learned his learning dis/ability was something to be shameful of. Many teachers explicitly and implicitly teach their students that having a dis/ability is something inherently negative or shameful. This encourages our students to reject their dis/ability label and try to fit in. Educators need to remember that intersectionality in DisCrit urges us to trouble singular notions of identity, and that our students with multiple stigmatized identities have complex and complicated experiences in schools, all of which are related and layered. When students experience dis/ability microaggressions repeatedly such as Angela's son was, they respond by refusing special education services and rejecting their dis/ability label (Dávila, 2015). Similarly, Ms. Brown has also spent time at home talking to her son about his dis/ability, by watching films together and having discussions about how dis/abled people are treated in society. Ms. Brown said:

> I watched Rain Man about a month ago with my sons and I remember the movie coming out, it wasn't that long in our history. I would recommend it for people in special ed to watch, because it's very telling where we were and how our society treats people with disabilities and you see Dustin Hoffman playing somebody who's very clear on the autism spectrum right and it feeds into the whole, you know, autistic genius artist, which is problematic in itself, that you have to have some hidden talent. Like if you don't have some genius, what's wrong with you as an autistic person, right? We forget about that, [we think] it's such a lovely warming movie and you know, it's also [about] a person who's neurotypical playing an autistic person, so that's problematic. It was so weird the end result is like well those people can't be part of society or live independently and

> when you look at people they showed that they had to be institutionalized. [After watching this movie, my son] totally changed his perspective, you know, he felt that discrimination against him. This was a world where people said some shocking things to him, they were all older, and this is the world where [what they said] is accepted (Ms. Brown, personal communication, 3/5/2020).

For both Angela and Ms. Brown, being parents of students with dis/abilities, they have also found value in bringing to the surface and having discussions with their children about their labels. Ms. Brown was able to help her son understand what having an IEP means. del Carmen Salazar (2013) says that a humanizing pedagogy helps students understand the realities of their lives, challenges them to think about the problems they experience, and uses teaching as a tool for radical reconstruction. After their discussion, Ms. Brown said that her son began writing summaries of his IEP, sharing with his teachers the exact supports he needs, and felt empowered to advocate for himself in school. By helping a student understand their dis/ability label, educators and parents can help empower them and support them in embracing and understanding their needs and ultimately humanize their experiences in society by destigmatizing what having a dis/ability means.

Lastly, relating to school programs and interventions, teachers and parents described various programs and supports that have support students well. Ms. Brown said that she chose to send her son to a public middle school over a private non-public school because of the public school had low student-to-teacher ratios, co-teaching[11] model was available, and it was evident that the school emphasized Positive Behavior Intervention System (PBIS). Ms. Brown appreciated that teachers at this school would "only [say] a kid's name if they were saying

[11] Co-teaching is an instructional delivery model where two credentialed teachers, a general education and a special education, co-teach a class together. In the past, special education teachers would pull students out of class to deliver services in another setting, however, more schools are now encouraging and scheduling teachers to co-teach classes.

something positive. So, if they needed a kid to be quiet… they wouldn't call out individual students" (Ms. Brown, personal communication, 2/13/2020). In terms of learning about culturally responsive pedagogies (CRP), at Lower Haight elementary, Amalia said the faculty were assigned academic readings and participated in weekly discussions about how to implement these strategies. As a district staff member, I know firsthand that not all schools emphasize PBIS and CRP. The third program that was brought up is one the special education department began implementing recently to support dyslexic students. This reading program was aggressively rolled out to all elementary and middle schools from 2015 to now, with teachers getting trained on the program and all students being screened and provided with the intervention as needed. Michelle said:

> I think something [the special ed department] has [done well is with] the dyslexia project…I think that is hitting a huge portion [of our population]…specifically African American boys and boys of color. I think that if it… can really take traction, we would have readers and we would have greater outcomes moving forward" (Michelle, personal communication, 2/21/2020).

In summary, the fourth theme aimed to answer the first research question about uncovering the humanizing qualities of special educations in an urban school district. Bayview and Lower Haight elementary schools have many systems and programs in place as well as employ adults with asset-based mindsets about dis/abled students which have contributed to their addressing of disproportionality of students in segregated classroom settings. Having these systems and mindsets ultimately supports student's wellbeing, inclusion of all types of learners, and fully humanizes their student experiences. Teachers, content specialist, and parents interviewed said that Lower Haight and Bayview elementary as schools that focus on developing

highly competent staff who are empathetic and knowledgeable about teaching diverse populations. These schools offer services and supports for the community, showing that in order to educate a child fully, their other needs inside and outside of the school need to be met as well. Deficit-based models focus on how to fix a student, whereas assets-based and humanizing approaches encourage inclusive practices so students are acknowledged and feel connected. Educators need to have empathy for dis/abled students and their families and should consider having discussions with their students about their dis/ability labels in a way that can empower and help them understand what it means to have a dis/ability in our society.

**Summary of Findings**

The purpose of this study is to highlight the kinds of experiences students and their family's experience in special education related to humanization and violence. By including the voices of teachers and district staff, the goal of this dissertation is to uncover examples of the kinds of pathologization, invisibilization, and humanization of our students and their parents. Through narrative interviews, a personal memo reflection log, and review of artifacts, the goal of this qualitative study is to uncover systems and structures that district office staff utilize in order to better support school site teams and IEP teams during discussions of more restrictive placements, present narratives of complicity and resistance from staff, and present counternarratives from participants. Data was collected through narrative interviews with teachers, content specialists, and parents, included my personal reflections from being a content specialist. Findings fell into four themes, which include the kinds of violence dis/abled students and families experience, how the school district and staff continuously disregard parent experiences and requests, the systemic disinvestment in students and families, and examples of

how schools and teacher can support students with their connections to school through humanizing praxis.

In the first theme, parents and students discussed ways that the school continue to pathologize differences with the creation of segregated classrooms, referring students to non-public schools, and kicking students out for misbehaving. Specifically, boys of color from low income families tend to be labeled as violent, as young as elementary students. Boys of color continue to be funneled into classrooms for students labeled as emotionally disturbed. Participants point to the fact that students who go into segregated classroom or non-public schools are taken from their communities and it is difficult for them to reintegrate after leaving. Parents and teachers that were interviewed discussed ways that dis/abled students continue to be unseen, invisible, ignored, and disregarded in schools, which leads to their different treatment and dis/ability microaggressions (Dávila, 2015). Microaggressive comments are coded language that are racialized, gendered, and ableist assumptions directed toward dis/abled students. These layered assumptions from educators often go unchallenged since students are at the receiving end of our help, which we say they need. To combat invisibility, parents and teachers find value in having open-discussions about dis/abilities, validating student identities, and talking about ways dis/abled individuals are valued in society.

In the second theme, parent participants described in their interviews their experiences of feeling unsupported by schools, discrimination of dis/abled students, frustration with special education processes and procedures, factors leading to disagreements and not trusting the school district, violence against dis/abled students in schools, and ways they advocate for their child. Parents inherently want to trust the school district but when they feel that they are being deceived, they bring in community-based organizations (CBOs) and advocates, do extensive research on

their own, and do what they can to help their child. In my experience, these families are the ones who are despised by special education staff since disagreements tend to result in longer meetings, scrutinization of their work, and leads to even worse relationships with the student and families. Since special education as a system and laws such Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) were created to focus on individual students, these issues that arise are understandable, as each family is fighting for their own child. Parent participants also shared that they also organize in schools in order to push changes through as a collective.

Within the third theme, teacher and content specialist that I interviewed discussed all the ways that our school district continues to disinvest in our students and families. Since our schools have been structured in ways to keep staff busy with meaningless paperwork, we as educators continue reinforcing normative standards in the children. Teachers and content specialists talk about the various ways that our highest needs classrooms are staffed with the least trained teachers, physical violence and restraints and continued to be promoted and used, and their perspectives on changes that they would like to see occur in order to support the inclusion of dis/abled students in schools. The data presented in this section corroborates the ways parents and students continue to be violent oppressed and dehumanized in our schools. Despite wanting to promote universal design for learning (UDL) strategies and inclusion of dis/abled students, educators like myself face many challenges in our roles, which is no excuse for why we are reproducing inequalities for dis/abled students and their families.

In the fourth and final theme, teachers and parents that I interviewed proudly boasted about how they were able to build strong relationships with their students and families, the extensive supports they have available at their schools, share examples of strong leadership and teacher collaboration, and discussed the importance of having empathy and supporting students

with feeling connected to the school community. When teachers take the time to build meaningful relationships with students and families, there are better outcomes for students. Each school community is unique and prioritizes different things. Schools that embed diversity and inclusion within the school culture, emphasized throughout the year and not only during special days or weeks, typically have higher tolerances for different learners and student misbehaviors. The central theme that weaves all of these experiences together is on student wellbeing, inclusion, and various types of humanizing praxes that can occur in schools. Participants describe how these authentic relationships form and how experiences and outcomes for dis/abled students are impacted when staff spend the time to understand all of their students' strengths and needs inside and outside of the classroom.

In the next chapter, I will review the major findings of the study, discuss in-depth the findings, and explain how my findings offer important insights for educators and school districts. I will also discuss implications for professional practice among special education staff and critical actions that can be incorporated for future research and practice.

## Chapter V: Summary, Discussion, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study is to highlight the kinds of experiences students and their family's experience in special education related to humanization and violence. Through narrative interviews and personal reflections, the study aimed to answer these research questions: 1) What are the humanizing and pathological qualities of special education in urban school districts? 2) What kinds of violence do dis/abled students and their families experience within special education? and 3) How do parents/family members of students labeled with dis/abilities respond to mistreatment by the school district and engage in advocacy and activism? In addition to seeking a better understanding of how students labeled with dis/abilities are funneled into segregated classrooms or non-public schools, I hoped to highlight the experiences of parents and students who continue to experience violent exclusion by educators and schools. I presented the findings by centering the voices of the oppressed, students and parents, which should be an urgent call for educators and school districts to listen to their experiences and to make systemic changes in special education. The findings of the present study resonated with and extended upon the research from the literature review. In this section, I will explain how my findings offer important insights for educators and school districts. In addition, I will discuss implications for professional practice among special education staff and critical actions that can be incorporated for future research and practice.

### Review of Major Findings

As a result of building authentic relationships with students and families, teachers were able to develop deeper empathy, care, love, and fully acknowledge the experiences and circumstances of their students' lives. Both Lower Haight and Bayview elementary schools employ teachers and administrators who implement these kinds of humanizing praxis. These

schools prioritize having a wide breadth of supports available for their students and families, provide opportunities for their staff to learn about and implement culturally relevant and critical pedagogies, and overall their staff members held more positive understandings about dis/abled students of color. All of these factors led to better schoolwide understanding about inclusion and stronger school-home relationships. Schools that embed diversity and inclusion within the school priorities are more accepting of different learners, are more empathetic to their students and families, and have higher tolerances for student misbehaviors.

The parents I interviewed discussed the way schools continue violently pathologize and label students as dis/abled, how students are invisibilized and mistreated within special education, and how school continues to funnel mostly African American and Latinx students into segregated classrooms through district-approved removal-by-force procedures. Parents, teachers and I believe that special education has created and maintained racist and ableist practices that police and punish students who deviate from the normed standards of whiteness and ability. Dis/abled student voices and needs are unseen, ignore, and disregarded and students are taught explicitly and implicitly about ways they should act, learn, and behave in order to fit in. Teachers often enact dis/ability microaggressions towards our students by framing their learning needs as a deficit innate to them that can be fixed.

The parents I interviewed shared many vivid stories about the toxic interactions they have had with school staff, ways educators have both dehumanized and violently disregarded their opinions, their frustration with the special education bureaucracy, and reasons why they do not trust the school district. Educators like myself knowingly or unknowingly continue to ignore parent voice and opinions, which fuels the need for them to voice their frustrations. The parents I talked to are all strong advocates for their children and describe wanting to want to trust school

staff, however, their traumatizing interactions with educators have led them to act cautiously. When parents feel like they are being deceived by school staff, they bring in support from community-based organizations or attorneys, do extensive research on their own, and advocate for their child through any means necessary.

In many ways, our school district continues to disinvest in dis/abled students and their families by staffing our highest-needs classrooms with the most inexperienced teachers, encouraging teachers to use physical restraints as a behavioral intervention, and not providing adequate training opportunities. This leads to our teachers burning out and leaving the profession. The school district continues the cycle of building the plane while flying it, which ultimately impacts our students and families. The teachers and content specialists I spoke with shared many changes that need to be addressed at the department and district level, including needing to emphasize inclusion, more training and support for staff, increased interventions for struggling students, less rigidity of special education services at schools, better addressing the identification and discipline of dis/abled students of color, and having less complicated bureaucratic structures that are not parent-friendly or student-centered.

Lastly, despite all the violence students and parents experience in school and from educators, we also have schools that focus on inclusion, student well-being, and are staffed by critical and empathetic staff. Humanizing praxis is present at both Lower Haight and Bayview elementary schools. At these schools, extensive supports for students and their families are prioritized, diversity and inclusion are embedded within the school culture, and culturally relevant and critical pedagogies are implemented. Parents participants shared that they are able to form authentic relationships when their teachers are empathetic and take the time to focus on

student and family well-being. In next section, I will discuss in-depth the findings from the present study

## Discussion

In general, experiences for dis/abled students can vary greatly based on where they are going to school and who their teachers are. When empathy, inclusion, and diversity are emphasized values in a school community, students of color are less likely to be labeled with dis/abilities and referred for segregated classes. This dissertation research study began originally by focusing on issues of disproportionality in special education. Disproportionality was a term that was forward thinking when it was first discussed by Dunn in 1968 but the focus discrepancy of students in eligibility categories and in special education classrooms ignored the complicated issues of race, class, power, and ability. Similar with research in disproportionality in special education, as I continued researching and reading, my dissertation moved in the direction of DisCrit, where there was a deeper analysis of race, dis/abilities, and power structures. As can be seen in my literature review in Chapter 2, my initial interest in disproportionality ultimately led me to literature and scholars in the field of humanizing education, DisCrit, anti-racist, and anti-ableist pedagogies. Below I discuss the first three themes together as pathological violence in special education and the fourth theme by itself as towards humanizing praxis in special education.

### *Pathological Violence in Special Education*

Within schools and special education, dis/abled students and parents experience violent dehumanization at the hands of educators who inflict social, emotional and physical pain. I describe the kind of violence that our students and families experience in special education as pathological for many reasons. This term draws inspiration from Annamma's (2019) book titled

*Pedagogy of Pathologizing: Dis/abed Girls of Color in the School-Prison Nexus.* Although pathology is a term typically used in the medical field, we as educators have adopted scientific terms in education. We as educators pathologize our students by labeling their behaviors and learning differences. Then we propose treatment plans in the form of IEPs and other interventions. The term pathological is defined as "to a degree that is extreme, excessive, or markedly abnormal and aggression that is violent, hurtful, with intent to harm" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Pathological can also be thought of as a physical or mental disease or used informally to describe compulsive or obsessive behaviors. I believe that the ways our students and families are treated in special education are extreme and have been harmful to the degree that we should consider our actions as educators as pathological. Furthermore, these acts of violence against students and their families are also intersectional. Students experiences are a result of the convergence of their race, class, gender, and ability-status.

Although segregating students based on race is illegal, segregating students based on ability is not (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). As long as Special Day Classes (SDCs) and non-public schools continue to be options, students of color and students labeled with dis/abilities will continue to be removed from general education classrooms. The terms overrepresentation and disproportionality (Artiles et al., 2010) are euphemisms for the state-sanctioned systemic violence that we inflict on students and parents. Fixing the problem of overrepresentation will require more than eliminating separate classrooms, it will require us as educators to recognize our standards of whiteness and ability and confront our neutral, ahistoric, and deficit-mindsets.

We as educators implicitly encourage our students to blend in, conform to normative standards of behavior and thinking, and to trust our professional opinions. When students visibly deviate from these standards or when they actively resist, we enact pedagogies of

pathologizations (Annamma, 2017) in the form of hyper-surveillance, hyper-labeling, and hyper-punishment. We as educators have the power to categorize our students as smart and good (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011), which are forms of property since those who are given the label can reap the benefits and those who are not are labeled with dis/abilities. Annamma et al. (2013) reminds us that there are very real material and psychological impacts on students when educators uphold dis/abilities as biological facts, rather than as social constructions. Within schools, educators control the boundaries of who is considered normal or abnormal. Special educators like myself are taught to police, regulate, and control student bodies by fixing the deficits within them. We are not taught to question or acknowledge how whiteness and notions of ability are centered in schools (Connor et al., 2019).

We as educators dehumanize our students when we ignore their voices, disregard their learning needs, and when we refuse to acknowledge that having multiple stigmatized identities can add complexity to their experiences. As Young (2016) found, teachers overwhelmingly describe students through the lens of dis/ability and actively ignore or erase their race. When race, class, gender, and other parts of a student's experience and identity are left unsaid, it hides and reproduces inequalities. Grace highlighted how Asian American girls are thought of as quiet and overlooked as needing mental health support. Her daughter's needs were invisible and despite speaking up, her requests were ignored by her teachers. The way we treat our students are also highly impacted by their class and gender. In schools our student's also experience dis/ability microaggressions (Dávila, 2015) regularly, such as when Ms. Brown's son was called lazy and unmotivated by his teacher. Teachers who do not acknowledge learning differences expect students to fix themselves through rhetoric of responsibility (Annamma, 2017). Furthermore, despite the fact that teachers are more vigilant and attuned to black boys' behaviors (Gregory &

Roberts, 2017), Ella shared how mental illness is ignored by educators especially if it is in an African American boy.

Compulsory education has never been used as a tool to liberate or empower people of color, so disproportionality is inequality by design (Tefera & Voulgarides, 2016). Special education was created in order to benefit white students and to sort and funnel students of color (Dunn, 1968). Within special education, educator's control who receives who receives services through biased assessment procedures, sorts students into segregated placements, violently escorts students into out-of-state residential placements against their will, and ultimately decides who has earned the right to return to the general education classroom. Taylor (1988) reminds educators to remember that more intensive individualized services can be delivered in integrated settings. Whether we choose to or not speaks to our mindsets about inclusion of dis/abled people in our communities. The hard work for our school district is to think about how to foster inclusion across all school sites, not only a few. Our school district has a history of diverting resources to certain inclusive schools and the rest become non-inclusive schools. That legacy remains to this day with only certain schools having certain programs, dis/abled students only able to attend select schools, and making it easier for schools to push out their different learners. As mentioned by Taylor (2001), when schools have the option of not being inclusive, they are more rigid about how a student should act/behave and the pressure to fit in and learn a certain way is increased.

As educators, our silence on issues of dis/ability oppression stems from the privilege of ableism, which remains mostly unexamined and unquestioned in schools. Structural systems and cultural practices in our schools actively dis/able students who are already struggling, since the understanding of human differences is rigid and narrow. Villa et al. (2005) says that

traditionalists ask if inclusion works but reconceptualists asks what needs to be done to make inclusion work. I have overheard and been in conversations with experienced special educators in my department like my supervisors and our directors about their strong belief in the benefits of segregated programs. As traditionalists, they express frustration that newer teachers advocate for full inclusion, which results in complications to staffing and allocations. The different perspectives in our department show that there is still a high level of disagreement with what inclusion means and how it can look like in public education spaces.

In addition to our students experiencing many forms of violence in schools, another standout finding from the present study was about the violent and toxic experiences their parents also experience. Instead of helping parents understand the complicated bureaucratic structures, taking the time to listen to their concerns, and supporting them through the IEP process, district staff like myself openly discriminate against their children and create unnecessary loops for them to jump through. IEP meetings have become spaces in which the district holds all the power and parents are oftentimes intimidated and afraid to ask questions. Parents want to be humanized, to have their names acknowledged, to have someone they trust in the IEP meeting, to be included in discussions about the education of their children, and want us to be accepting and inclusive of their children.

Parents of dis/abled children inhabit unique positions since they experience toxic interactions which awakens them the activism that is necessary. Ms. Brown's son was called lazy and unmotivated, Angela's son was ignored by his teachers to the point where he became suicidal, Grace's daughter's voice continues to be disregarded by her teachers, and Ella's sister did not even get a call when her son was experiencing severe symptoms of his mental illness at school. Their experiences are the ones that were shared for the present study, but imagine how

many more traumatizing and dehumanizing experiences our students and their parents have had in schools? These parents, as a last resort, find it necessary to advocate for their children, get involved in local community-based organizations, support other parents going through similar situations, not because they want to get into conflict with district staff but because their children's lives depends on it. Parents organize so their voices are louder as a collective. DisCrit reminds us that activism is required for dis/ability liberation and these parents exemplify that. Behind closed doors, my colleagues and I talk negatively about vocal and involved parents, partly to vent. It is complicated, we vent because of the inequities we see since we are spending most of our time and energy with families of privilege. These parents have disagreements which means longer meetings and close scrutinization of our work as educators. I agree with Ms. Brown that the term advocate has a negative connotation. Listening to and speaking to Ms. Brown, Angela, and Grace, reminds me that staff should not be blaming parents but doing what they can do support them, regardless of their financial privilege or lack thereof. It is important for all teachers and staff but especially special education staff to remember why and how to work with parents in positive ways, so the trust is not broken.

Our school district continues to disinvest in dis/abled student and their families in many ways. Despite research that show students who learn in segregated settings have worse experiences in schools (Jones & Hensely, 2012; Lackaye et al., 2006), there are inconsistent definitions and personal philosophies among central office staff for when a student could be referred for the segregated classes. Many teachers believe that the grass is greener on the other side, meaning any class which is not theirs is likely better for their challenging students. Unfortunately, when everyone thinks that, students move quickly through the least restrictive environment continuum. The least restrictive environment continuum requires school districts to

offer an array of placement options so public schools tend to push out students with the most significant behavioral, academic, and mental health needs (Taylor, 1988). When our most restrictive classrooms have the least experienced teachers, they become launchpads into non-public schools instead of being the final destination. We train our staff to use highly dehumanizing behavioral interventions such as physical restraints, instead of responding in non-violent or caring ways. Why do we keep focusing on academic core standards instead of social-emotional, culturally relevant, and anti-racist learning? We have so much potential in making transformative changes for our students.

As described by Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al. (2017), disproportionality in special education results from practice-based and socio-demographics factors. Our district implements practice-based interventions that are individually-centered and race-neutral which ignores systemic factors of oppression. As we continue being flagged by the state, we need to consider how issues of hegemony impact our students and how our educators continue to default whiteness as the norm. Similar with Bornstein's 2017 study, our school district ignores family voice and issues of race entirely. Without a clear understanding and critique of how the race-neutral policies in special education impact our diverse student populations and their families, we will continue setting unrealistic expectations for how students should behave, think, and act. Something that we as educators need to confront is the historical legacies of special education which have been enacted to oppressors dis/abled peoples and our role as oppressors in the system of white supremacy and ableism. The next discussion section will look at the fourth theme from the findings section which focuses on the ways educators and school districts can make transformative changes by reinvesting in our students and their families.

### *Towards Humanizing Praxis in Special Education*

As educators and within our school district, we need to reimagine special education in a way that focuses on social transformation, liberatory and humanizing pedagogies, and joy. By doing so, we can reinvest in our students, their families, and our communities. We can work collectively towards this by adjusting our colorblind ideologies, focusing on the experiences and outcomes for students at the margins, and using our positionality to advocate for our students and families.

Schools in our district have reputations as ones that are more or less inclusive. Both Bayview and Lower Haight schools center their work on building meaningful relationships with their students and families. In addition to having experienced and caring administrators, the faculty at these schools reflect the diversity in their student population, and together they have been able to increase their students and families with connecting with the school. Knowing that, I was not surprised to hear examples of their array of school supports, empathic staff, strong teacher collaboration, and utilization of culturally relevant and critical pedagogy. Humanizing pedagogy is one that considers the experiences and realities of students, co-construct knowledge with them in the pursuit of praxis (Bartolome, 1994; del Carmen Salazar, 2013). Teachers, content specialists, and parent participants described enacting this type of pedagogy by uplifting their students, having open dialogue about their dis/ability labels, supporting them in understanding oppressive systems, and discussing with them how they can interrupt and resist those conditions. Having these types of conversations can help validate a person's multiplicities (Lugones, 2006) and support them with understanding that their dis/ability is a part of what make them unique. Humanizing praxis occurs when we validate a student's identity, engage in reciprocal sharing of perspectives, care of them, and support them with self-reflections.

To reinvest in our students, their families, and our communities, we need to shift away from the dominant deficit ideologies (Fergus, 2010) and focus on the emancipatory potential of our schools (Liasidou, 2014). Critical conversation with students about their dis/abilities happen in pockets around the district and rarely happen in teacher education classrooms, according to the participants. Amalia shared how she engages in a type of DisCrit pedagogy (Annamma, 2017) which rejects classifying a student based on their behaviors but is rooted in love and understanding. For Amalia's students, learning about their dis/ability labels from her was an affirming experience because it came from a caring person. Freire (1970) says that by going through the process of humanization individually and as a collective, we can create safe spaces at our schools that can be radically different than the way it is now.

## Recommendations

Building off of available research in this topic, this study highlights the importance of building relationships with students/families and emphasizing inclusion at the school and district level. Below, I will share recommendations for school districts, educators and future researchers. Many of these are not new, they have been discussed and shared by other scholars, but due to the information surfaced from the present study, I find it important to reiterate them. In writing these recommendations, I aim to challenge myself and my colleagues to create personal accountability to infuse these practices into our work so we can advocate for systemic change for dis/abled students and their families.

### *For School Districts*

While district offices have little impact on the daily occurrences at school sites, change at this level can trickle down and make large impacts for students and families. Appealing to the humanness of school district officials, in order to make meaningful and transformative changes

for the dis/abled community, special education central office staff should adopt additional frameworks into our work such as Disability Studies Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) (Annamma, Boelé, Moore, & Klingner, 2013), Disability Studies in Education (DSE) (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012), and humanizing frameworks (Freire, 1970; del Carmen Salazar, 2013). Appealing to district staff who prefer seeing fiscal benefits, school district who adopt these frameworks can reduce the number of one-to-one aides, reduce the number of students who we pay for private/non-public schools, and spend less time, money, and energy on due process. Addressing disproportionality by school districts might not be prioritized until the interest convergence of white, non-dis/abled students align with dis/abled students of color. When school districts to close down segregated classrooms or refer fewer students to non-public schools, less students will be placed in segregated settings not because segregation is wrong, but because the district needs to save money. I do not believe that special education will fundamentally change but I do think that school districts have a lot to gain if we can make these shifts.

Ms. Brown reminds district staff to pause and listen to what students and parents are telling us. Even if what they are saying is not accurate or in way that we do not like, it is our job to listen and respond. Many of their concerns can be easily addressed if we take the time to listen. Since many of our students experience violence in special education, we need to question our preconceived notions that having an IEP is a positive thing, ask ourselves how to reduce the negative impacts of dis/ability labels, and how we can help reduce stigmatization for dis/abled individuals in schools. School districts need to listen to voices of dis/abled students and make changes in practices that privileges the voices of the populations we serve. When we invite students into the conversation, their counternarratives will shed light on solutions we can implement as well as understand how they have strategically navigated schools despite our

violent actions against them. In doing so, we are not giving them a voice, as they already have a voice, we are just more closely listening to it.

### *For Teachers and Staff*

We as teachers are not trained to be inclusive of all students. We are trained under the medical model of dis/ability which sees it as an embodied deficit rather than embedded within our biased schooling system. When we shift away from traditional special education, we see that segregating students based on ability is a human rights issue with special education providing that means of exclusion. Inclusion is a political act since we are uncovering the barriers that prevent our students from accessing and participating in school (Slee, 2011). Returning to the experiences of the participants of this study can help guide our actions. Angela's son is not forced to act and think neurotypically anymore by his teachers. Ms. Brown's son had teachers who were highly empathic to his needs and went above and beyond to ensure his accommodations and needs were being implemented. Grace's daughter had teachers who were highly aware of her needs and did not force her to discuss things that she was not comfortable with. Dolores continues to view her students through a humanizing lens and supports them in understanding their dis/abilities.

First, educators need to have an understanding systemic racism, ableism, and issues that lead to pathological violence in special education. One way to support teachers with this is by incorporating Disability Studies in Education (DSE) into trainings (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012). DSE is a field that challenges educators to think about dis/abilities in a way that accepts human differences and challenges the hegemony of predominantly medical, psychological, and scientific knowledge used in traditional special education. We as educators can use DSE to understand

issues facing our students and as a tool for advocacy. DSE can be a lens to see the gaps in special education, and help address societal barriers for dis/abled peoples

When educators understand these issues, then they begin adopting and implementing humanizing pedagogies (Camangian, 2013) and a DisCrit pedagogy (Annamma, 2017) into their classrooms. A humanizing pedagogy shifts the attention away from culturally deficits and onto academic strengths. A humanizing pedagogy draws from culturally relevant, critical pedagogical, and critical literacy theories. Camangian (2013) proposed implementing a humanizing pedagogy by agitating our students political, arousing their critical curiosity, and inspiring self and social transformation. Next, a DisCrit pedagogy builds on student's strengths and resistance and is committed to reframing students' notion of dis/ability. Furthermore, within the classroom, teachers can teach comprehensive histories of communities of color, reflect on ways policies, practices, and intersections are perpetuated, and lastly disrupt interaction and systemic oppression. A DisCrit pedagogy (Annamma, 2017) solidly rejects classifying a student by their behavior but is rooted in love that recognizes students' resistance as a natural part of existing. A teacher implementing a DisCrit pedagogy welcomes dis/ability as a political identity.

We as educators and staff need to shift away from deficit-based thinking and instead highlight student strengths, their unique perspectives and experiences in the world, and not force them to achieve normative standards our society puts on them. For many of our students, their lived experiences vary greatly from the academic field of special education, which causes tension in the classroom and in our interactions with them. Our students' entire experience, stories, needs, should be what we highlight, not any one piece of their identity. While race and ability are socially constructed, they highly impact the experiences of those labeled as dis/abled. While some students do benefit from special education services, for others it is a source of pain and

violence. What could it mean to our students and what could it look like if we brought in humanizing frameworks into our classrooms? What could it mean for our students to be humanized and to be taught about self-love, structural inequalities, political solidarity with other communities, and self-determination? These are all possibilities and changes that are possible and in our control. The next section will provide recommendations for future research.

### *For Future Research*

Future researchers who are interested in this area can consider adding to the body of knowledge the experiences of dis/abled youth who are labeled with dis/abilities and placed in segregated classrooms. This research exists, such as the autoethnography by Hernández-Saca and Cannon (2019) who discuss spiritual healing after given a dis/ability label and Annamma (2017) who chronicles the resistance strategies in girls of color who experience dis/ability labels in the juvenile justice system. The present study was only able to explore experiences by one Asian American family, one African-American family, and two white families, so future researchers should include diverse student experiences. Although the present study aimed to uncover ways central office staff are addressing disproportionality, the data that surfaced showed that our school district continues to perpetuate the problem and that addressing the issue was more successful at individual school sites. An intersectional approach to the study of the experiences of dis/abled students can broaden and deepen our understanding of the issues facing our students.

Future research can also focus on how school districts with diverse populations are reimagining inclusion, how they are shifting mindsets and ideas about dis/abilities, ways they challenge traditional ideas about dis/abled youth, and ways they support students in staying in the general education classroom. Future research that includes the stories by dis/abled peoples can affect future teaching, practices, and policies. To support with shifting the master narrative in

special education and about dis/abled youth, this kind of research challenges traditional understanding of what kind knowledge is important about dis/abled people and challenges the hegemonic structures that preserve the traditional special education approach.

For me personally, I would interested in engaging in future research that centers on the experiences of students and families through either participatory action research (PAR) or community-led engagement (CLE) methodologies. Due to the clear tensions that are present between the district and community, the counternarratives and conversations that arise through a more community-based and action-focused research project could be powerful in shifting mindsets of those working in the school district. These methodologies would allow educators like myself to hear directly from the students and families about what needs to be addressed and include them in the creation of solutions. The next section will provide concluding thoughts.

**Conclusions**

This study aimed to center the voices of students and their parents who experience violent dehumanization through special education. In talking to parents and teachers, examples of pathological and intersectional violence surfaced. Based on our students' intersecting identities, they are treated and perceived in ways that result in dis/ability labels, punishment, and referrals into segregated settings. As educators, we are highly focused on diagnosing and treating any deficit that we observe. Our expectations for students to think, behave, and learn in specific ways results in violent actions against them and their families.

In speaking with parents and listening to their stories, it is clear that there are many things that teachers, content specialists, and district staff need to work on to truly address the issue of disproportionality of dis/abled students in segregated settings. Families with resources are able to advocate for specific programs and additional services in the general education setting, whereas

families with less resources at their disposal are oftentimes coerced into not ideal segregated settings. For parents and students, segregated classrooms are a last resort, an option they consider when all else has failed. Ella's nephew attended a residential school because his public school did not recognize his mental health crisis. Grace's daughter ended up in a non-public school after years of her needs going unnoticed. Ms. Brown's son was slated to attend a non-public school after years of turmoil in public. Angela's son has now found success in a non-public school that celebrates and supports his unique learning profile. Public schools were not designed to support all students, hence why so many experience violence, disengagement, and are referred out. Parents want district staff to listen to their concerns and teach their children, focus on the human being rather than administrative documents, and remember that within IEP meetings, the power structures are unbalanced which can be intimidating for them.

Teachers and school sites where inclusion is emphasized are able to build strong relationships with their students and families, support students in understanding their dis/ability label, and keep help students find success in the general education setting. These are schools and spaces in which dis/abled students are not considered with deficit mindsets. At the district level, central office staff are only engaging in surface-level administrative work to address disproportionality, when there is so much potential to address disproportionality by incorporating humanizing frameworks such as Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Bell, 1980) and Disability Studies (Annamma et al, 2013). To make transformation change for dis/abled students and to actually address disproportionality, school districts need to stop labeling, sorting, criminalizing, and dehumanizing students. When school shifts the focus to addressing structural inequalities, political solidary with oppressed populations, self-love, and self-determination, then will

dis/abled students start seeing more equitable changes. Next, I will provide my personal final reflections.

**Researcher's Final Reflections**

As I am nearing the end of this dissertation, the largest academic task I have completed in my life, I think back to a student I taught ten years ago. Tiffany, at that time was a 17-year old Latinx student of mine, had so many positive traits such as her quick wit, sociable personality, and makeup skills. Due to her ADHD diagnosis, she struggled to focus in her classes. Tiffany was shocked when I said her ADHD was considered a dis/ability in school and she avoided me for months. Tiffany is highly intelligent and spoke her mind with adults, which teachers read as her being disrespectful, and she was disciplined often. Tiffany was also considered for non-public school placement but refused it. At that time as a brand-new teacher, my understanding of dis/abilities were minimal, I bought into the cloak of benevolence of special education, focused a lot on classroom management, and pushed for my students meet traditional academic expectations. In the months after our initial conversation and after giving Tiffany some space, we had many conversations privately and in our advisory class about learning differences, how it felt for them to have a dis/ability label, and why they were afraid of coming into my classroom and being seen with me at school. I did not understand at that time that Tiffany was resisting her dis/ability label and the school for penalizing her for being intelligent and vocal. Despite all her teachers saying they wanted what was best for her, none of us were truly addressing her needs, celebrating her strengths, or creating a school environment that supported her multiplicities.

While completing my literature review, I read *The Pedagogy of Pathologizing: Dis/abed Girls of Color in the School-Prison Nexus*. This book was inspiring for many reasons but mainly

because of the student voices that were highlighted and discussion on the pedagogy of resistance. Annamma (2019) writes:

> DisCrit solidarity rejects notions of managing individual or whole class behavior, as these conversations are predicated on the notion of fixing students. DisCrit solidarity rooted in love recognizes student resistance as a natural part of existing in a prison nation. It must be expected and consciously invited to into the classroom. If dis/ability were conceptualized as a welcomed political identity, instead of a thing to punish for failing to meet standards, the behavioral response would be something much more loving (p. 155).

My teacher education was not rooted in ideas of love and dis/ability resistance but I am grateful through this dissertation process to have learned about it and hope to continue pushing myself to be a more critical special educator. Understanding how special education as a field contributes to the oppression of dis/abled students, I am conflicted about my currently role. I question if I would rather go back into the classroom or consider becoming a school administrator so I can more closely work with a school community. After completing this research, I am interested in teaching and supporting new educators with understanding about dis/abilities and critical special education. I am unsure if transformational change will occur from within special education but I think there is possibility for incremental changes. I hope to challenge myself to shift away from processes/procedures and focus on humanizing the students and families that I work with. Writing this dissertation has taught me the importance of being empathetic with students and families and helped me think from their perspectives. I am grateful to all of my previous students who have pushed me to be a better educator and to the participants in this study who have bravely shared their stories.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guides

Content Specialist

1. Tell me about your work experiences in education and in SFUSD.
2. Do you think students of color are disproportionately represented in SPED?
3. In our department, are we discussing and combating disproportionality?
    - In what ways do content specialists address disproportionality?
4. How often are you asked to consult on change of placements?
    - Tell me about some that you've had recently.
    - How often are they students of color?
5. How do you determine if a student needs a more restrictive placement?
6. How do we support teachers if a change of placement is being discussed?
7. How often is student demographic information (i.e. race, class, disability) discussed during change of placement discussions?
8. In our department, what are some systems we have to ensure students are placed in the LRE?
    - What sources of data are used in determining if students need an SDC?
        - Are these used consistently for each student?
9. In what ways do we collaborate & work with the community/families?
10. In what ways can SPED central work to interrupt and disrupt patterns of disproportionality?
    - How about the district?

Special Education Teacher

1. Tell me about your work experiences in education and in SFUSD.
2. Is disproportionality of students of color in SPED a problem?
3. In what ways do special ed. teachers address disproportionality?
    a. At your school, how are you discussing and addressing disproportionality?
    b. In our district, how are we discussing and addressing disproportionality?
4. As a teacher, have you ever referred a student for a more restrictive placement?
    a. If so, tell me about those experiences.
    b. If not, tell me more about that.
5. In what ways do you educate and discuss the LRE continuum with your colleagues, students, and families?
6. In what ways do you work with the general education teachers?
7. How does your content specialist or supervisor support you when you have questions about LRE for a student?
    a. How do you determine if a student needs a more restrictive placement?
    b. What sources of data are used in determining if students need an SDC?
        i. Are these used consistently for each student?
    c. How often is student demographic information (i.e. race, class, disability) discussed during change of placement discussions?
8. How can SPED central better support you and the school to address disproportionality?

General Education Teacher

1. Tell me about your work experiences in education and in SFUSD.
2. Is disproportionality of students of color in SPED a problem?
    a. In what ways do teachers address disproportionality?
    b. At your school, how are you discussing and addressing disproportionality?
    c. In our district, how are we discussing and addressing disproportionality?
3. As a teacher, have you ever referred a student for a more restrictive placement?
    a. If so, tell me about those experiences.
    b. If not, tell me more about that.
4. In what ways do you educate and discuss the LRE continuum with your colleagues, students, and families?
5. How do you determine if a student needs a more restrictive placement?
    a. What sources of data are used in determining if students need an SDC?
        i. Are these used consistently for each student?
    b. How often is student demographic information (i.e. race, class, disability) discussed during change of placement discussions?
6. In what ways do you work with the special education teachers?
7. How can SPED central better support you and the school to address disproportionality?

Parent/Community Member

1. Tell me about your experiences with having a child with an IEP.
2. How have your experiences with Special Education Services been?
3. Is your child receiving enough support in school?
    a. What more support do they need?
    b. How do you advocate for your child?
4. In what classroom setting is your child in currently (GE, SDC, NPS)?
    a. Do you like that classroom setting?
5. Has your child ever been referred for a more restrictive classroom such as SDC or NPS?
    a. Did you agree to the change or not?
6. Do you think disproportionality of students of color in SPED is a problem for the district?
    a. In what ways do teachers and schools address disproportionality?
    b. Is the district addressing disproportionality?
7. How familiar are you with the LRE continuum?
    a. Did staff explain it to you or did you learn it on your own?
8. What are your thoughts about classrooms such as SDCs and NPSs?
9. Do you know youth who have experience in SDCs or NPS?
    a. How was the process that led up to that referral?
10. What advice would you give to district staff so they could support parents better?
11. How can school district better support parents to address disproportionality?

## Appendix B: Categories Grouped into Themes

| Final Themes | Categories | Answers Which RQs? |
|---|---|---|
| **Theme 1: Violence Against Dis/abled Students** | Student experiences, perspectives on inclusion, sped services, and their dis/abilities | 1 and 2 |
| | Violence against disabled students/families. Students are pushed out of schools, funneled into SOAR and NPS schools for behaviors. SPED labeling and sorting students. | |
| | Invisibility of student dis/abilities, lack of acknowledgement of student needs, medical model of dis/ability placing deficits in students | |
| | Negatives ideas, treatment against dis/abled students of color | |
| | Analysis of factors leading to disproportionality | |
| **Theme 2: School District Disregard for Parents** | Examples of parent involvement and advocacy | 2 and 3 |
| | Parent confusion, frustration, and disagreements with the school district | |
| | Parent revelations and mindsets on disability | |
| | Parent experiences with the school district | |
| **Theme 3: Disinvestment in Students and Families** | Areas of improvement for school-sites to promote inclusion | 2 and 3 |
| | Teacher-level improvements and needs | |
| | District-level. & SPED central shortfalls and areas for improvement | |
| | Important points for educators to keep in mind when working with dis/abled youth and their families | |
| | What teachers need in order to address disproportionality better. Why teachers are struggling with inclusion? | |
| **Theme 4: Sense of Belonging and Humanizing Praxis** | Areas in which the school district, schools, and sped central are making positive impacts | 1 |
| | Positive contributions by teachers, educators, and leaders at school-sites | |
| | Positive mindsets and treatment of dis/abled students | |